

◆ What is sexting and online sex?

Sexting and online sex (also called 'cyber sex', 'virtual sex' or 'phone sex') means using e.g. phone calls, text messages, online chat rooms, email, instant messaging or online video chat (such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype or FaceTime) to exchange sex chat with another person/s (it could be your regular partner or someone you met online). It might involve talking and flirting in ways that will get you both sexually aroused, sending intimate pictures or video or masturbating off or on video chat. Sexting and online sex can be fun and exciting ways of keeping, or seeking, intimate contact, but they should always be done **safely and respectfully**.

◆ During Lockdown

During lockdown the national guidance includes the advice not to meet up with anyone outside of our household, this includes romantic and sexual partners. For many people this has affected their intimate relationships. If you're in a relationship and you're isolating separately or your partner is self isolating within the household you might also want to take a look at our **'COVID-19 Sex and Relationships Information & Tips' Factsheet** and our **'Date Night ideas for self-isolating couples'**.

Lots of people who are looking for an intimate relationship are continuing to hook up online or to date online during in lockdown and some people are doing it for the first time. It can be good to maintain these type of connections but it's important to do it safely. As there is no physical contact during sexting and online sex, there is no risk of sexually transmitted infections to either partner. However, there are **still other risks** from sexting and online sex and some things you should know if you're doing it or thinking of trying it. Here's some information about how to have **safer sex online!**

◆ Privacy

If you're trying out some new apps or platforms to stay in touch, bear in mind that **privacy settings are normally turned off by default**, so you may wish to check these and amend as you see fit; for example by locking chat rooms on *'Houseparty'*, or controlling comments on *'Tik Tok'*. Take the time to look through the privacy and security settings on whichever platform you're using, and **be careful when uploading photos**; many platforms make you agree to letting them use your photos however they choose, without telling you when you upload them.

- ◇ Remember that your **browsing history and messages** are never 100% private or anonymous but there are some steps you can take to add another layer of protection.
- ◇ Browsing in **'incognito' mode** will prevent other apps, websites and advertisers from seeing what you're doing (although the broadband account holder, broadband provider and the website you're looking at will still be able to see).
- ◇ Using an **encrypted** service to send messages e.g. signal will essentially 'scramble' your messages while it's being sent, and then the phone receiving it will translate it back again. It's not fool proof but it is much safer than a non-encrypted service. For example, WhatsApp has end to end encryption
- ◇ **Change your phone's settings** so pictures aren't automatically backed up online.
- ◇ You might want to think about only taking photos you **can't be identified in**. **For example**—avoid having your face in photos, don't wear uniforms with logos or which can be easily recognisable, maybe cover tattoos etc., check that there isn't anything identifiable in the background of the photo.
- ◇ Livestreaming is also becoming more popular too. If you're watching, **there is a risk of seeing something upsetting or unsuitable, such as violence or inappropriate sexual content**; if you see something that upsets you, you can report it easily through the reporting tools on each app. If you're broadcasting live yourself, be aware of your online footprint and remember that even if deleted, your online content may still be accessible for a long time; make sure you **only livestream to those you wish to broadcast to**, be that that just to friends, or to a wider group if you choose .

◆ Security

There's lots of useful advice on the **National Cyber Security Centre's** website about passwords, online shopping and 'phishing'.

Internet Matters also has really user-friendly guides to setting up privacy and controls on all sorts of different devices, from smart phones to gaming platforms, browsers and entertainment platforms such as Netflix.

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With increased time spent online, criminal scams such as **identity theft** are likely to increase in kind; indeed Google reports that scammers are sending 18 million hoax emails about COVID-19 every day, and in March 2020, 471 fake online shops selling fraudulent virus-related equipment were taken down by the **National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC)**.

If you receive an email that you think looks at all suspicious you can forward it to report@phishing.gov.uk. If anything is found to be malicious the **NCSC** will take it down and you can help protect others from falling victim to scams.

Are they who they say they are? When most people think about 'grooming', they think about children, however adults are vulnerable to grooming too. Grooming is a process of manipulating someone or building false trust with someone to use them or exploit them. Grooming can happen to people of all walks of life and from all sorts of different backgrounds.

So, how can I tell if a person is fake? There are some steps you can take to be more confident:

- ◇ Reverse image search their photos to see if they've been stolen from someone else
- ◇ Ask them to live video chat
- ◇ Pay attention to their behaviour; pitting you against your friends or family, asking you to keep the relationship secret, attempting to draw you off public platforms and into private platforms, or getting defensive if you ask questions can all be red flags.
- ◇ Be wary of someone asking you to do things for them but never doing things for you.
- ◇ Be particularly cautious if you notice that the person seems surprisingly short of money or asks you to give them or lend them money, especially if you don't know the person in real life.
- ◇ If they threaten you or blackmail you, this is illegal. You should report this immediately to the police as they will be able to help you.

◆ **Safe, fun and respectful sexting**

Ask First! As with any personal or intimate interaction, it's important to get consent from someone before you start, whether you're sharing flirty messages, photos or chat. It might be tempting to ask for a nude, or to send one when you're flirting or in a relationship. **But it's important to consider:**

- ◇ **How old you both are.** It's against the law to ask someone who's under 18 to send a nude, even if you're under 18 as well. It's also against the law to send a nude to someone who is under 18.
- ◇ **What your relationship is like.** If asking for a nude or sending a nude is out of character for your relationship, it could make the other person feel uncomfortable. Ask yourself if it makes sense in the context of your relationship.
- ◇ **Whether it will put pressure on the other person.** Making someone feel bad for not sending a nude, even if you don't mean to, is a type of pressure. If you're not sure if someone would feel pressured, don't ask.
- ◇ **How you would feel in their position.** It can help to think about how you would feel if someone asked you to do something you weren't comfortable with or put pressure on you.
- ◇ **Whether you trust them.** It's really important to make sure you really trust the other person

Remember, if someone sends you a nude, it's against the law to share it on without that person's permission. If someone has shared around or published your nude without your consent, this is not okay and you can report this to the police. **'Revenge porn'** is where your ex leaks your nude or sends it round for revenge. This is also against the law. **The Revenge porn helpline** can help to report it and get the pictures or videos removed, even if you want to remain anonymous.

If at any time **you aren't happy or don't feel comfortable** with the online interactions you're having- you can stop the conversation. If someone is making you feel uncomfortable and refuses to listen and respect your decision on not wanting to do something, you don't owe them anything. **It can be upsetting for these kinds of conversations to end this way, so if you have someone else close to you that you feel comfortable discussing this kind of experience with, do.**

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◆ **Be creative!**

There are so many creative and thoughtful ways to keep in contact with the people you like, such as:

- ◇ Voicenotes
- ◇ Tiktok
- ◇ Making gifs
- ◇ Drawings
- ◇ Using words creatively

Use the apps and even the limited creative resources you have around you! Look for ideas and tips online. You're now a multimedia art director!

◆ **Support & Information**

If you ever feel as though you are in immediate danger call 999.

National Cyber Security Centre's (NCSC) Lots of useful advice on this website about passwords, online shopping and 'phishing'.

Diverse: Sexual Health an Relationships Support and Counselling: **01223 508805** or enquiries@dhiverse.org.uk

ChildLine- Helpline: **0800 111**

Safeline: Working to prevent sexual abuse

NSPCC - Helpline: **0808 800 5000**

Google Security Tips on COVID-19

Internet Matters

Revenge Porn Helpline—**0845 6000 459**

Respond is an organisation that provides a range of services to people with learning disabilities who have suffered from sexual abuse. You can call their helpline on **0808 808 0700**.

Link to Change: Support with Child Sexual Exploitation.

VICTIMS CHOICE: Support with online abuse

Small Steps : can help you if you suspect that someone close to you is in danger of being radicalised

Net Aware: Advice about your child's social media use