

Sexting starts as young as 12

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SALT LAKE CITY — Sexting starts as young as 12 years old for some kids, a new study says.

A study published this month in the journal *Pediatrics* looked at the texting and sexual behaviors of 420 children between the ages of 12 and 14 with “symptoms of behavioral or emotional difficulties” in Rhode Island. Of study participants, 22 percent said they had sexted in the last six months, 17 percent had sent suggestive texts, and 5 percent sent suggestive photos in their texts.

Study authors said adolescents who participated in such messages were more likely to also engage in other sexual acts.

While sexting may not necessarily lead to engagement in sexual acts, it may be an indicator of such behavior. 2013 research from the Guttmacher Institute claims that teens now are waiting longer to have sex than those in the recent past. From 2006 to 2008, only 11 percent of 15- to 19-year-old teenage girls and 14 percent of males of the same age had sex before they were 15 years old; that's compared to 19 and 21 percent of 15- to 19-year-old girls and 15- to 19-year-old boys, respectively, in 1995 had sex before age 15.

Teens who engage in sexual acts may be practicing safer sex, too. The teen birth rate in Rhode Island experienced a 52 percent decrease from 1991 to 2011, according to Office of Adolescent Health.

The study authors warned, however, that the behavior that can become dangerous.

“Although adolescents may be more digitally savvy than their parents, their lack of maturity and inattention to consequences can quickly lead to serious negative outcomes,” they wrote.

Sexting poses dangers to both the sender and receiver, as it can spur bullying, or be classified as child porn, among other problems. Authors suggest starting the discussion about appropriate digital and sexual behaviors before adolescence.

Parents can also monitor their children’s phone and Internet use to curb bad digital behaviors.