

Diocese of Rapid City

Keeping God's Children Safe

A Safe Environment Newsletter

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Youth and Cell Phones. Have you heard. . .

Last spring I met with parish coordinators and pastors for Diocesan Safe Environment Program trainings. In more than one location in our city and rural areas, I was informed of a problem some had noticed in their parishes. Some youth in fourth and fifth grades were sexting each other. Both boys and girls were asking; often boys often initiate the action — to send a nude picture of themselves to the other. This is how they show they are boyfriend/girlfriend. We have children, nine to eleven years old, sending pictures of their nude bodies to each other. Upon returning to Rapid City, a few days later I picked up a newspaper to see an article about student sexting on the rise in the schools here as well. How? Through the easy availability of cellphones. Do our youth see this as a normal part of “dating” at this stage in their young lives?

Do you know. . . Do they know. . .

The dangers that go along with their actions?

- Pictures meant to be seen by one person are soon held by others. Boys collect pictures like they do trading cards. Posted text, pictures, and videos are permanent (somewhere).
- Nationally, the average age of children engaging in sexting was 10 years old.
- Sexting is a crime. It is a misdemeanor for minors to send naked pictures of themselves or to receive similar images.
- At the moment one turns 18, they are then possessing child pornography, a federal felony.
- Smartphones allow predators to communicate with minors in ways they could not before, striking up a “relationship” with the children. Later they ask them to meet them.
- Sending sexually explicit photos (or videos) to a stranger can lead to sextortion. This form of blackmail uses the threat of publicizing the images as a leverage to obtain larger favors (video chats or sexual acts). While usually adults, it has happened among classmates.¹
- Parents have a right and duty to monitor their children; it is not a minor’s privacy issue!

Worst app for children

South Dakota’s Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force (ICAC) has seen a shift in child predators. Predators now are finding a child online and manipulating the child to “self-manufacture child pornography,” said Brent Gromer, commander of the task force and supervisory special agent with the state Division of Criminal Investigation.¹

The worst application in relation to cybercrime for children to use is **Snapchat**. Snapchat is a messaging tool known for messages that disappear once they are seen, including sexual images. It is easy for recipients to keep Snapchat pictures without the sender knowing it. Snapchat has a password-protected section, called My Eyes Only, where one can keep images; check this on your child’s phone. Sexting among students often happens on Snapchat.

Mental health effects. . .

The *Communication Education* journal, in 2012, published a study on college students who interact with their cell phones in class. They performed worst on tests—often a full letter grade or more.

A 2016 study published by the *Pediatrics* journal found that the increasing rates of depression in adolescents, especially in girls, correlated with the use of mobile phones and texting apps. Youth who spent more time on social media have a greater likelihood of being unhappy.²

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. . . We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.³

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**Diocese of Rapid City
Safe Environment**
www.rapidcitydiocese.org/safe-environment/

**USCCB Office of Child
and Youth Protection**
[http://www.usccb.org/
issues-and-action/child-
and-youth-protection/
index.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/index.cfm)

**“Do you not
know that you
are the temple of
God, and that the
Spirit of God
dwells in you?”**

I Corinthians 3: 16

What to do . . .

As parents and the adult in these relationships, we have a lot of work to do, and decisions to make! Prayer is always a great place to start, and using our faith values to guide our decisions and relationships with our children and youth. Parents and adults are facing challenges our parents never dealt with; we need to be educated. One may need help to understand the depth and breadth of communication tools youth have at their fingertips when given a smartphone; even iPods can transmit messages and photos—not just music! It is not about the age of your child, but rather whether your child is developmentally ready to have “full access to the adult world,” and whether you’ve laid the groundwork to prepare them for healthy and responsible device use.⁴ Have you modeled the behavior on your own device?³ Will they know what to do when the unexpected happens?

Understand your family values; what is important? Do you teach empathy and kindness? Sense of responsibility? Encourage creativity? Family time? Relationships? “Determining your family values independently of the phone conversation can help shape how devices get used...This is about the quality and kind of childhood you want them to have, as an individual and as a family,” (Psychologist Catherine) Steiner-Adair says.⁴

Talk about technology with your children. How do others use technology? School? Friends? How do you use it? How does your child use it; what does he like? Why? How does he feel after playing many video games? The goal is to encourage each to build self-awareness and learn to regulate their relationship to devices, and how it is different than personal relationships. Start young, as introducing responsible device use is another parenting duty today - like handing children a book or telling them how to eat healthy. . . consider it an opportunity to educate your child, demonstrate proper etiquette, and test out rules.⁴

Know your options. Study the different types of technology available for children and youth. Instead of opting for a smartphone, consider a lesser cellphone model that parents some control leverage over technology. They may provide developmentally-appropriate privileges, such as being able to text only parents or a certain number of approved friends, using only pre-approved apps, and having limited or no access to the Internet.

Become smart about various devices and their capabilities. Most of the things one can do on a smartphone can be done on other devices they may use: iPads, Kindles, laptops, or desktop computers. This also applies to the apps they may use. Be sure to include this in your conversations together about responsible, ethical use of devices. Communicate with teachers about school uses of technology—the hardware and software , as well as how much exposure your children will have.

Develop rules together, and set rules and limits before handing over the phone. In your conversations, visit about rules possibly changing through the years. Some topics of conversation may include: Who pays for the phone? The monthly charges? Who owns the phone? Who is held accountable? Who will know the passwords? If it is lost or breaks, then what happens? Times the phone is allowed or not? Limits on time usage? Use various phone functions responsibly (text, photo/videos)?³

Be Ready to Take Action . . .

- Children who encounter someone demanding sexual images should immediately report this to authorities, such as their school liaison officer or local police.
- Minors should not take naked pictures of themselves, even if they don’t mean to send the images to anyone, since the pictures could get synched to the cloud and reported to police or accounts could be hacked.
- Parents to visit with their children and young ones’ activities and friends online, and to have rules about device use.
- Families are encouraged to watch out for one another’s children. Adults need to learn the latest devices and applications their children are using. “If your kids are using it, you gotta use it,” said (Hollie) Strand.⁵

FOOTNOTES

¹Tan, T. (2018, May 14). Student Sexting on the Rise in Rapid City Schools. *Rapid City Journal*, Retrieved from https://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/student-sexting-on-the-rise-in-rapid-city-schools/article_c11bda26-aa6e-56fa-ab13-a25de5e09856.html

²Ruston, D. (2017, December 22). Smartphones Aren’t a Smart Choice in Middle School. [CNN]. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/22/opinions/smartphones-middle-school-opinion-ruston/index.html>

³United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Life and Dignity of the Human Person. [USCCB] <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/life-and-dignity-of-the-human-person.cfm>

⁴Anderson, J. (2018, February 24). When to Give Your Child a Smartphone. [Harvard Graduate School of Education]. Retrieved from <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/02/when-give-your-child-smartphone>

⁵Gahagan, K. (2017, March 22). ‘Keeping Kids Safe’ Teaches Parents How to Spot Online Dangers. *Rapid City Journal*, Retrieved from https://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/keeping-kids-safe-teaches-parents-how-to-spot-online-dangers/article_5205bf77-b075-52d3-b11a-01cf69e1f62e.html

OTHER SITES WITH MORE INFORMATION

Common Sense Media; Cellphone Parenting. <https://www.common sense media.org/cellphone-parenting>

Talking to Kids and Teens About Social Media and Sexting—Tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics. <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/Pages/Talking-to-Kids-and-Teens-About-Social-Media-and-Sexting.aspx>