

2010 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey Highlights on “Sexting” Among High School Students

EDC has administered the *MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey* (MWAHS) since 2006 to monitor trends in health and risk behaviors among middle and high school adolescents. The survey is funded by the MetroWest Health Foundation, an independent philanthropy providing over \$5 million in annual financial support to address the health needs of twenty-five communities in the MetroWest area of Massachusetts. The MWAHS data is used to inform planning, policy-making, health education, and prevention programming at the local level. Nearly 38,000 students in grades 6-12 in 24 school districts were included in the most recent survey. Below are findings from the more than 23,000 high school students in grades 9-12 who took the survey in the fall of 2010.

According to data from the survey, 13% of high school students report involvement in “sexting” – defined as sending, forwarding, or posting nude, sexually suggestive, or explicit photos/videos of someone you know. 10% of all students have sent a “sext” message in the past 12 months, and 5% have had a photo/video of themselves sent by someone else, with a small degree of overlap between the two groups. In addition:

- Students who have had sexual intercourse in their lifetime have five times the odds of being involved in sexting than students who have never had intercourse.
- Sexting involvement is related to more frequent use of cell phones to send text, email, and other messages.
- Youth who do not self-identify as heterosexual are also more likely to send sext messages or have sexts of them sent by others.

Findings also highlight a concerning link between sexting behavior and psychological distress. The data shows:

- Twice as many youth who are involved in sexting report depressive symptoms in the past 12 months, compared with youth who do not report sexting (36% vs. 17%). Similarly youth who are involved in sexting are more likely to report a suicide attempt in the past 12 months (13% vs. 3%).
- After controlling for demographic and behaviors related to sexting, students involved in sexting have twice the odds of reporting depressive symptoms, and three times the odds of reporting a suicide attempt.

Sexting encompasses a variety of behaviors related to students’ online communications: sext messages may be sent as a deliberate form of cyberbullying, but they also may be sent as a way for youth to engage within online communities. The study is limited in that it cannot determine whether there is a causal association between sexting and psychological distress, and what other factors may contribute to this behavior. Nonetheless, the findings draw attention to a concerning connection between sexting and mental health problems that must be addressed through both anti-bullying and health promotion efforts. Additional analyses and discussion on this topic are forthcoming.

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