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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