

Self-Produced Sexual Images Among Children and Young People

OUR POSITION:

Understanding the contexts in which self-produced sexual images are created and shared is essential for developing effective responses that promote both safety and wellbeing among young people. Bravehearts advocates for:

- Adopt proportionate, child-centred legal frameworks
- Strengthen responses to non-consensual sharing and sexual exploitation.
- Establish clear and consistent national guidance for professionals.
- Embed prevention within relationships and sexuality education.
- Prioritise safeguarding over punitive responses in practice.
- Invest in workforce capability.
- Strengthen support and recovery pathways for affected young people.
- Strengthen young people's participation and platform accountability.

Background

The rise of smartphones and social media has changed how children and young people communicate, build relationships, and express themselves. Within this digital landscape, self-produced sexual images have become an increasingly important issue for researchers, policymakers, educators, and child protection professionals (UNICEF, 2025). While these images may be shared consensually between peers, they can also be associated with risks such as exploitation, coercion, and non-consensual distribution. Understanding the contexts in which self-produced sexual images are created and shared is essential for developing effective responses that promote both safety and wellbeing among young people.

Key Concepts and Terminology

Consensual versus Non-Consensual Image Sharing

Consensual sharing occurs when an individual voluntarily creates and sends a sexual image to another person, often within the context of a romantic or intimate relationship. In contrast, non-consensual sharing involves the distribution, viewing, or use of a sexual image without the permission of the person depicted (Henry & Beard, 2024; Schmidt et.al., 2024). An image may be created and shared consensually but later distributed non-consensually by the recipient or others.

Peer versus Adult Involvement

The involvement of peers versus adults is another important distinction in understanding self-produced sexual images. Peer involvement generally refers to situations where images are created and shared between young people of a similar age, often within the context of adolescent relationships and sexual development (although through non-consensual and secondary sharing this may involve privacy violations, social harms, and image-based abuse). Adult involvement, however, raises

concerns about exploitation, grooming, coercion, and abuse, particularly when adults solicit or possess sexual images of minors (Slane, Martin & Rimer, 2021). Differentiating between peer-to-peer interactions and those involving adults is essential for understanding levels of risk, power dynamics, and the appropriate legal and safeguarding responses.

Limitations of the Term “Sexting”

Although the term sexting is widely used in research, policy, and media discussions, it has been criticised for oversimplifying a broad range of behaviours (Gewirtz-Meydan et.al., 2025). The term can encompass consensual image sharing, coercive requests for images, non-consensual distribution, and image-based abuse, despite these behaviours differing significantly in terms of consent, intent, and harm. Many researchers favour more precise terms such as self-produced sexual images, youth-produced sexual imagery, or non-consensual intimate image sharing (Finkelhor et.al., 2023). Using more specific terminology allows for a clearer understanding of the behaviours involved and supports more accurate research, policy development, and intervention strategies.

Prevalence and Patterns

Research consistently shows that self-produced sexual imagery (often referred to in research as "sexting" or youth-generated sexual images) is relatively common among adolescents (Howard et.al., 2023; Madigan et.al., 2018), although prevalence estimates vary depending on how the behaviour is defined, the age group studied, and whether researchers distinguish between consensual and non-consensual image sharing.

International meta-analyses suggest that approximately 20% of adolescents have sent a sexual image of themselves, while a larger proportion (approximately 35%) have received such images, with around 15% forwarding sexts without consent (Mori et.al., 2022; Steinsbekk et.al., 2026). Rates tend to increase with age during adolescence, particularly from the mid-teen years onwards (Steinsbekk et.al., 2026). More recent studies indicate that creating and sharing sexual images has become a recognised part of some young people's romantic and sexual development, rather than being an unusual or deviant behaviour.

Motivations and Contexts

The motivations underlying self-produced sexual images should be understood within the broader context of adolescent development (Finkelhor et al., 2023). Exploration of sexuality, attraction, intimacy, and gender relations has long been a normal part of adolescence (Van Ouytsel, Walrave & Ponnet, 2018). Previous generations engaged in these developmental experiences through in-person interactions and private encounters; contemporary young people increasingly do so within digitally mediated environments. While digital technologies have transformed the methods through which such exploration occurs, many of the underlying motivations remain consistent with those observed across generations. The production and sharing of sexual images may therefore reflect developmental, relational, and social processes that are not new, even though the technological context introduces unique opportunities and risks.

Relationships and intimacy

Many young people produce or share sexual images as part of exploring relationships, attraction, trust, and intimacy. For some, exchanging images may be viewed as a contemporary form of flirting, relationship-building, or maintaining closeness, particularly in long-distance relationships. Research suggests that self-produced sexual images are not always associated with risk-taking or problematic behaviour (Benjamin et.al., 2025); rather, they can occur within consensual relationships where young people perceive image sharing as a normal expression of affection or sexual interest. However, even when images are initially shared voluntarily and within trusted relationships, there can be significant risks if relationships change, trust is broken, or images are redistributed without consent (Sciacca et.al., 2023).

Social norms and peer expectations

Young people's decisions to produce or share sexual images are often influenced by social norms, peer cultures, and perceptions of what is considered typical behaviour among their age group (Symons et.al., 2018). In some social environments, sharing intimate images may be seen as a common aspect of dating or adolescent social interaction. Young people may feel pressure to conform to peer expectations, gain social approval, demonstrate attractiveness, or maintain social status within friendship groups. The widespread visibility of sexualised content online can also contribute to perceptions that creating and sharing such images is normal or expected (Burén, Holmqvist Gattario & Lunde, 2022; Sebsbie & Tsegaye, 2025). Importantly, perceived norms do not necessarily reflect actual behaviours, but they can shape young people's choices and influence their assessment of risks.

Coercion, pressure, or exploitation

Not all self-produced sexual images are created or shared freely. Some young people experience direct or indirect pressure from romantic partners, peers, or online contacts to create and send sexual images (Dully et.al., 2023; Sparks, Stephens & Trendell, 2023). This pressure can range from persistent requests and emotional manipulation to threats, intimidation, blackmail, or grooming. In some cases, offenders deliberately exploit young people's desire for relationships, belonging, or validation to obtain sexual images. Once images are shared, they may be used as a tool for further coercion, including threats to distribute the images unless additional content, money, or sexual acts are provided (Bloxsom et.al., 2024; Henry & Beard, 2024; Sparks, Stephens & Trendell, 2023). Understanding the role of coercion and exploitation is critical, as it highlights that some self-produced sexual imagery occurs within contexts of abuse rather than genuine consent.

Role of digital culture and platforms

Digital technologies and online platforms play a significant role in shaping how, why, and how often young people create and share sexual images. Smartphones, social media, messaging applications, and image-sharing platforms provide constant opportunities for communication and self-expression (Avci, Baams & Kretschmer, 2025; Pérez-Torres, 2024), making image exchange fast, easy, and often integrated into everyday social interactions. Features such as disappearing messages, private chats, and live streaming can create a perception that content is temporary or secure, even though images

can still be copied, saved, or redistributed (Li, 2024). Digital culture also encourages visual communication, self-presentation, and the pursuit of social validation through likes, comments, and online attention. These factors can contribute to both the normalisation of image sharing and the amplification of associated risks, particularly when privacy controls are misunderstood or when content is shared beyond its intended audience.

Risks and Harms

As discussed above, the creation and sharing of self-produced sexual images by children and young people can occur in a range of contexts, including consensual sexual exploration and relationship development, but it can also involve pressure, coercion, manipulation or exploitation. Importantly, the production of an image does not necessarily constitute the point at which harm occurs.

Significant risks can emerge when an image that was created or initially shared consensually is subsequently distributed, shown to others or used without the young person's consent. Research increasingly distinguishes consensual sexual image sharing from the subsequent non-consensual distribution of those images, with the latter recognised as a form of image-based sexual abuse (Dully et al., 2023; Henry & Beard, 2024). Once an image moves beyond its intended recipient, the young person may experience a loss of control over its circulation and face ongoing social and psychological harms, including bullying, harassment, victim-blaming, anxiety and depression (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2023; Schmidt et al., 2024).

Non-consensual sharing can expose children and young people to a range of secondary harms, including bullying, harassment, humiliation, social exclusion and reputational damage (Schmidt et al., 2024; Sciacca et al., 2023). Images may also be used as a means of coercion or control, including threats to distribute an image unless the young person provides additional images, sexual activity, money or other forms of compliance (Henry & Beard, 2024). The ease with which digital content can be copied, redistributed and retained can intensify these harms, creating uncertainty about who has accessed an image, where it may appear in the future and whether it can ever be fully removed.

The psychological and emotional impacts can be substantial. Young people whose images have been shared without consent may experience shame, anxiety, distress, loss of trust, fear of judgement and a reduced sense of safety or control (Schmidt et al., 2024). These impacts can be compounded where responses from peers, families, schools or other systems place responsibility on the young person who created or shared the image rather than on those who violated their consent (Dully et al., 2023). Responses that are punitive or shame-based may therefore compound the original harm and discourage young people from seeking assistance or disclosing subsequent victimisation.

Risks and harms are also not experienced equally. Research has identified important gendered dimensions to the social consequences of sexual image sharing (Dully et al., 2023; Schmidt et al., 2024). Girls and young women may experience particularly severe reputational consequences, sexualised bullying and victim-blaming, reflecting broader gendered expectations and sexual double standards. Other children and young people, including those who experience marginalisation because of sexuality, gender identity, disability or other characteristics, may face additional vulnerabilities or barriers to seeking support. This highlights the importance of understanding self-

produced sexual imagery within its broader social and relational context, rather than treating all image creation or sharing as inherently equivalent in motivation, risk or harm.

Legal and Policy Landscape

In Australia, the legal framework governing self-produced sexual images operates across Commonwealth, state and territory legislation. At the Commonwealth level, the *Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)* contains offences relating to the use of a carriage service to access, transmit, make available, publish or distribute child abuse material, as well as offences concerning the possession, control, production, supply or obtaining of such material for use through a carriage service (ss 474.22–474.23). These provisions can potentially apply to sexualised images involving people under 18, including self-produced images. However, where a person was under 18 at the time of the alleged conduct, proceedings for these Commonwealth offences cannot be commenced without the consent of the Attorney-General (s 474.24C).

State and territory laws provide an additional layer of regulation, with offences, defences and exceptions varying between jurisdictions. In Queensland, the *Criminal Code Act 1899 (Qld)* contains offences relating to the making, possession and distribution of child exploitation material. Consequently, conduct that young people may understand as consensual sexual image sharing can intersect with legal frameworks principally concerned with protecting children from sexual exploitation and abuse. This creates an important policy challenge: maintaining strong legal protections against exploitation and non-consensual conduct while ensuring responses to consensual peer behaviour are proportionate, child-centred and do not unnecessarily criminalise young people.

This creates an important tension between criminalisation and safeguarding. Research increasingly emphasises the importance of distinguishing consensual sexual image sharing from coercive practices and image-based sexual abuse, rather than treating all forms of sexual image exchange as equivalent in motivation, context or harm (Dully et al., 2023; Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2023; Moritz & Christensen, 2020). Legal and policy frameworks must protect children from coercion, grooming, sexual extortion, non-consensual sharing and exploitation, while recognising that self-produced sexual images can also occur within the context of adolescent sexual development, identity exploration and consensual peer relationships (Howard et al., 2023).

The policy challenge is therefore to ensure that frameworks intended to protect children do not inadvertently compound harm through disproportionate or unnecessarily punitive responses. A child-centred approach should differentiate consensual peer behaviour from conduct involving coercion, exploitation, power imbalances or non-consensual distribution, with the nature of the response informed by consent, developmental context and actual or potential harm. Safeguarding, education and early intervention may be more appropriate responses to consensual peer behaviour, while strong legal and protective interventions remain essential where coercion, abuse or exploitation is present (Dully et al., 2023; Henry & Beard, 2024).

Responses and Interventions

Effective responses to self-produced sexual images require a multi-layered approach that combines prevention, education, safeguarding and appropriate intervention. School-based education and digital literacy programs have an important role, but should extend beyond messages about online safety or simply advising young people not to create or share images (Dully et al., 2023). Education should build understanding of consent, respectful relationships, privacy, digital ethics and the consequences of sharing another person's image without permission, while equipping young people with practical strategies for seeking help when something goes wrong.

Schools and other organisations working with children also require clear safeguarding and reporting pathways. Responses should distinguish between consensual peer behaviour and situations involving coercion, grooming, exploitation, sexual extortion, significant power imbalances or non-consensual sharing. A proportionate response is particularly important: punitive or shame-based approaches may discourage disclosure and help-seeking and risk further victimising a young person whose trust or consent has already been violated (Dully et al., 2023).

Parents and caregivers are also important sources of prevention and support. Open, non-judgemental conversations about relationships, sexuality, consent and online behaviour can help young people make informed decisions and increase the likelihood that they will seek help if they experience pressure, exploitation or image-based abuse (Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2022; Dully et al., 2023). When incidents occur, the immediate priority should be the young person's safety and wellbeing rather than blame or punishment.

Responsibility cannot, however, rest solely with children, families and schools. Technology companies and online platforms have an important role in designing safer digital environments, providing accessible reporting and image-removal mechanisms, detecting and disrupting exploitative behaviour, and preventing the redistribution of intimate images (OECD, 2024). This reflects a broader shift from expecting children to manage online risks themselves towards recognising the responsibility of the systems and services in which those risks arise.

Across these responses, a central challenge is achieving an appropriate balance between protection and young people's agency. Children and young people have rights to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation, but they also have evolving capacities, rights to privacy and participation, and a need for developmentally appropriate information about sexuality and relationships. Effective responses should therefore seek to increase young people's knowledge, choices and capacity to act safely, while intervening decisively when consent is absent or when coercion, abuse or exploitation occurs.

Bravehearts Position

Bravehearts recognises self-produced sexual images among children and young people as a complex safeguarding issue that cannot be addressed through criminalisation, prohibition or risk-avoidance messaging alone. While significant harms can arise through coercion, sexual extortion, non-consensual sharing, bullying and exploitation, the creation of an image does not in itself necessarily constitute abuse or exploitation. Responses should recognise the developmental, relational and

digital contexts in which image sharing occurs and distinguish consensual peer behaviour from circumstances involving coercion, exploitation, power imbalances or violations of consent.

Bravehearts supports a child-centred, rights-based and proportionate approach that prioritises prevention, safeguarding and early intervention, while maintaining strong responses to those who exploit children or violate their consent. Children and young people should not be unnecessarily criminalised, shamed or punished; responses should instead strengthen their safety, agency and capacity to seek help. Responsibility for preventing harm must also extend beyond children themselves, with governments, schools, families, child-serving organisations, law enforcement and technology companies sharing responsibility for creating safer environments and responding effectively when harm occurs.

In line with this, Bravehearts recommends the following:

- **Adopt proportionate, child-centred legal frameworks:** Ensure Australian legislation and its application appropriately distinguish consensual peer activity from coercive, abusive and exploitative conduct. Safeguarding, diversion and education should be prioritised over the unnecessary criminalisation of children and young people.
- **Strengthen responses to non-consensual sharing and sexual exploitation:** Ensure strong and accessible legal protections and remedies for image-based abuse, including non-consensual sharing, coercion and sexual extortion. Young people should have access to straightforward reporting mechanisms and timely assistance to remove or limit the further distribution of images.
- **Establish clear and consistent national guidance for professionals:** Develop nationally consistent, cross-sector guidance for schools, police, child protection agencies and other child-serving organisations on responding to self-produced sexual images. Guidance should support proportionate decision-making based on consent, age and developmental context, power imbalances, coercion, exploitation and actual or potential harm.
- **Embed prevention within relationships and sexuality education:** Ensure age- and developmentally appropriate education addresses digital consent, respectful relationships, sexual image sharing, privacy, coercion and help-seeking. Education should move beyond abstinence, fear-based messaging and placing responsibility on children to avoid harm, towards building knowledge, skills and healthy relationship behaviours.
- **Prioritise safeguarding over punitive responses in practice:** Schools and services should respond to incidents primarily through a safeguarding and wellbeing lens. Punitive or shame-based responses that may compound harm, discourage disclosure or inadvertently blame children whose images have been misused should be avoided.
- **Invest in workforce capability:** Provide educators, child protection practitioners, social workers, health professionals and law enforcement with training in adolescent development, digital sexual cultures, consent, coercion, technology-facilitated sexual abuse and trauma-informed, child-centred responses.
- **Strengthen support and recovery pathways for affected young people:** Ensure children and young people affected by non-consensual sharing, coercion or exploitation have timely access

to trauma-informed emotional and therapeutic support alongside practical assistance, including reporting, image removal and management of ongoing online or peer impacts.

- **Strengthen young people’s participation and platform accountability:** Meaningfully involve children and young people in the design of policy, prevention initiatives and responses that affect them. Technology companies should also be accountable for implementing safety-by-design measures that reduce opportunities for coercion, exploitation and redistribution, alongside accessible reporting and rapid response mechanisms.

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