

# CHILD

## TERMINOLOGY GUIDELINES

### FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE

#### Sexting

*This term appears to have a generally agreed meaning and/or can be used without stigmatising and/or otherwise harming the child.*

“Sexting” has been defined as the “self-production of sexual images”,<sup>192</sup> or as the “exchange of sexual messages or images” and “the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images through mobile phones and/or the internet”.<sup>193</sup> Sexting is a form of self-generated sexually explicit content,<sup>194</sup> and the practice is “remarkably varied in terms of context, meaning, and intention”.<sup>195</sup>

While “sexting” is possibly the most common form of self-generated sexually explicit content involving children, and is often done by and among consenting adolescents who derive pleasure from the experience, there are also many forms of “unwanted sexting”. This refers to the non-consensual aspects of the activity, such as sharing or receiving unwanted sexually explicit photos, videos, or messages, for instance by known or unknown persons trying to make contact, put pressure on, or groom the child. Sexting can also be a form of sexual bullying, where a child is pressured to send a picture to a boyfriend/girlfriend/peer, who then distributes it to a peer network without their consent.

Unwanted sexting is related to the discussion above on sexual harassment and unwanted sexual comments,<sup>196</sup> and research has shown that the practice of sexting is far from gender-neutral. It has been suggested that sexting “might be understood as an online extension of [...] sexual harassment” against girls.<sup>197</sup>

**Conclusion:** “Sexting” is a commonly used term, and a frequent practice among young persons. It is often a consensual activity between peers, although research has shown that girls feel pressured or coerced into it more often than boys.<sup>198</sup> When sexting leads to abuse or exploitation, it is crucial that the fact that the material is self-generated does not result in blaming the child for what happens or in holding the child criminally liable for the production of child sexual abuse material.

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<sup>192</sup> K. Cooper et al., *Adolescents and Self-Taken Sexual Images: A Review of the Literature*, 2015.

<sup>193</sup> J. Ringrose et al., “A Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and ‘Sexting’”, Study Prepared for the NSPCC, 2012, p. 6.

<sup>194</sup> UNODC, “Study on the Effects of New Information Technologies on the Abuse and Exploitation of Children”, p.22.

<sup>195</sup> K. Cooper et al., *Adolescents and Self-Taken Sexual Images*, p. 24.

<sup>196</sup> See supra, section C.4.V on the sexual harassment of a child.

<sup>197</sup> K. Cooper et al., *Adolescents and Self-Taken Sexual Images*, p. 22.