



# INTERNET & WIRELESS DEVICE SAFETY: IN THE WORLD OF VIRTUAL REALITY, THE CONSEQUENCES ARE REAL

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

ACCORDING TO A RECENT STUDY, 20 PERCENT of teenagers have electronically sent or posted naked or semi-naked photographs of themselves online. Even more teens are sending suggestive or explicit e-mails, instant messages (IMs) or text messages – in some cases to people they have never met in person, but only know online.

While most expect that the content will only be viewed by a trusted boyfriend or girlfriend, too often that is not the case. Nearly 40 percent of teens report that they have had racy messages or photos shared with them – when they knew those pictures were intended for someone else. This content can be forwarded to lots of unintended recipients or posted on the Internet for the world to see.

In addition to causing embarrassment, circulating these photos also can be illegal. Depending on the content and ages of the subject and recipient, some e-mailed or texted photos may meet the legal definition of child pornography. Persons convicted of possessing child pornography face up to 10 years in prison. They may also have to register as sex offenders for the rest of their lives.

There are many possible conse-

quences associated with suggestive messages and photographs of oneself. These messages or photos may:

- Get passed around to others or posted on the Internet;
- Raise the expectation of sexual activity, potentially putting the sender in uncomfortable or dangerous situations;
- Cause the sender and/or recipient to face child pornography charges, be imprisoned and have to register as a sex offender;
- Cause embarrassment and legal or employment problems for parents and family members;
- Result in suspensions from school or athletic participation; or
- Hinder future attempts to get into college, receive scholarships or become employed.

College recruiters, teachers, potential employers, parents and others may all be able to find previous Internet posting were after the original has been deleted. For example, before a photo's deletion, it may have already been copied or posted elsewhere.

Failing to comprehensively assess consequences is one of the hallmarks of youth. Another hallmark is poor

judgment. Growing up takes time. So, in many instances, teenagers are aware of the risks posed by their online activities – but they believe the bad consequences will not happen to them.

Education and frank discussions between parents and their children are critically important. Parents and educators should consistently explain that sexually themed communications and photos are inappropriate and dangerous. In cyberspace, harmful or embarrassing photographs can quickly make the rounds and fall into the wrong hands, including those of child predators. They can also lead to ridicule and unwanted attention.

Parents should take an active interest and pay close attention to their kids' use of technology. They should be clear with their teens about what they consider appropriate behavior. Cell phone carriers offer tools, some of which are free, to limit wireless devices' content and communications capabilities. Text messaging service can be turned off or limited to certain hours. Internet access can be removed or filtered by age appropriateness. Parents can consider buying a phone that has no camera feature.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER



### INTERNET & WIRELESS DEVICE SAFETY

- Don't assume anything sent or posted online is going to remain private.
- There is no changing your mind in cyberspace — assume anything sent or posted online will never really go away.
- Nothing is truly anonymous. Screen names, phone numbers or e-mail addresses can all be traced back to an individual if someone – including a criminal – tries hard enough.

**The Wireless Foundation**  
[www.wirelessfoundation.org](http://www.wirelessfoundation.org)

**Office of the Attorney General**  
(800) 252-8011  
[www.texasattorneygeneral.gov](http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov)



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT