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Prevention of sexting among high school students: preventive programme proposal

Zapobieganie zjawisku sekstingu wśród uczniów szkół średnich: propozycja programu profilaktycznego

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Abstract

Encouraged by increasing public and scientific attention, research has made great strides in recent years to improve our understanding of sexting. However, despite these advances, scientifically based and evaluated prevention strategies are not available and are still in development. There is a need to design sexting prevention strategies in order to implement and evaluate them. For this reason, we have developed a comprehensive sexting prevention program, the background, structure, content, and future evaluation of which are presented in this paper. We have proposed a program that needs to be evaluated to train psychologists, parents, and students in order to prevent the negative consequences of sexting and to develop resources for dealing with it.

Keywords: sexting, youth, prevention program

Streszczenie

Z uwagi na wzrost zainteresowania opinii publicznej i badaczy zjawiskiem sekstingu w ostatnich latach przeprowadzono badania naukowe, które w znaczącym stopniu przyczyniły się do poznania tej specyficznej formy komunikacji. Jednak pomimo tych postępów nadal nie ma kompleksowych strategii profilaktycznych, opartych na badaniach naukowych i poddanych analizie. Istnieje potrzeba opracowania metod zapobiegania zjawisku sekstingu, a następnie ich wdrożenia i merytorycznej oceny. Z tego względu podjęliśmy próbę opracowania kompleksowego programu profilaktyki sekstingu. Jego podstawę, strukturę, zawartość i przyszłą ocenę przedstawiamy w niniejszej pracy. Zaproponowany przez nas program należy poddać ocenie pod kątem przeszkolenia psychologów, rodziców i uczniów, aby zapobiegać negatywnym skutkom sekstingu i opracować zasoby niezbędne do radzenia sobie z tym zjawiskiem.

Słowa kluczowe: seksting, młodzież, program profilaktyczny

INTRODUCTION

Today's application of digital technology provides numerous knowledge resources and the ability to share information and build relationships with specific stakeholders worldwide. In addition to these effects, some specific behaviours have also arisen along with the development of digital technology. In this context, sexting has emerged and attracted the growing interest of researchers and professionals. Sexting is generally defined as the sharing of sexually explicit content through electronic or digital media (Barrense-Dias et al., 2019, 2017). Researchers have defined various forms of sexting which mostly refer to consensual and non-consensual sexting (Dodaj and Sesar, 2020b; Molla Esparza et al., 2020; Mori et al., 2019). Consensual sexting is seen as a developmental form of contemporary sexual communication among adolescents, and it is likely to be a risky practice but not a general social problem. On the other hand, non-consensual sexting, where a person is pressured or blackmailed, or sexually explicit content is forwarded without their consent, is considered harmful with potentially serious consequences for the person concerned (Dodaj and Sesar, 2020a; Molla Esparza et al., 2020; Mori et al., 2019).

Numerous studies (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020; Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2020; Ojeda et al., 2020) demonstrate high prevalence rates of sexting across countries. The results of a meta-analysis by Madigan et al. (2018), which included 39 studies (with 110,380 participants younger than 18 years of age), found a mean prevalence rate for sending and receiving sexts of 14.8% and 27.4%, respectively. They also noted that the prevalence rates increased with youth age. The prevalence of forwarding sexually explicit content without consent and having sexually explicit content forwarded without consent were 12.0% and 8.4%, respectively. Results related to gender were inconsistent across the studies. Some studies found that girls were more likely to send sexual images than boys (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2014), while boys were more involved in sending, receiving, and forwarding sexually explicit content (Strassberg et al., 2017). However, some other studies found no gender differences in the prevalence of sending and receiving sexually explicit content (Beckmeyer et al., 2019; Campbell and Park, 2014). Hence the studies in the field of sexting clearly show that sexting among young adolescents is an issue that deserves scientific attention and requires prevention measures with a view to reducing prevalence (Kopecký, 2012; Livingstone and Görzig, 2014; Temple et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Wood et al., 2015).

The frequent involvement of young adolescents in sexting is of concern because research has repeatedly shown that it is associated with a variety of negative consequences (Henry and Powell, 2015, 2018; Kernsmith et al., 2018; Laird et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2019). Depending on the type of sexting, these consequences include sexual exploitation (Laird et al., 2020), exposure to extortion, online grooming, cyberbullying, distribution of child pornography (Crofts and Lee, 2013), and other forms of technology-enabled sexual violence (Henry and Powell, 2015, 2018; Ross et al., 2019). In addition, individuals exposed to sexting coercion are at risk of suicide attempts, depressive symptoms, emotional dysregulation, sexual problems, risky sexual behaviours, externalising problems, attachment disorders, and intimate partner violence (Dir et al., 2013; Kernsmith et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2021; Medrano et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2019). Encouraged by increasing public and scientific attention, research has made great strides in recent years to improve our understanding of sexting. However, despite this progress, scientifically sound and evaluated prevention strategies are not available, as Ojeda and Del Rey (2022, p. 1669) recently noted: "There is also a need to evaluate the strategies and actions used to address sexting, with the aim to design and implement evidence-based initiatives that equip schools and teaching staff with effective tools to prevent and tackle the potential risks associated with this phenomenon." For this reason, this paper presents a comprehensive sexting prevention program, its background, structure, content, and future evaluation.

SEXTING PREVENTIVE PROGRAM PROPOSAL

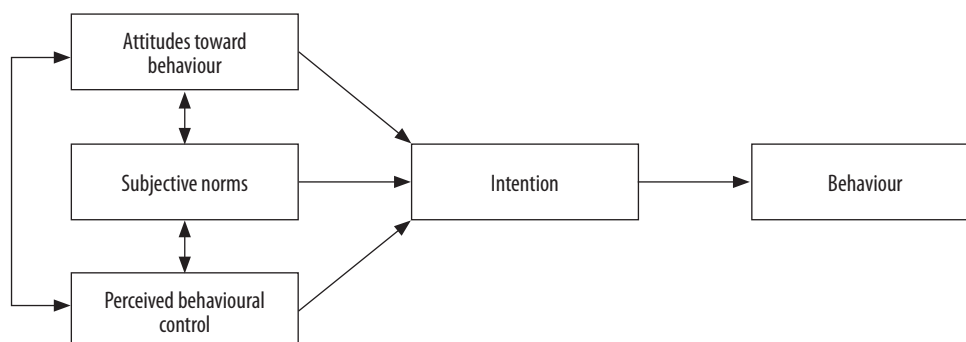Sexting prevention program should be a voluntary after-school program characterised by a stable setting, regular

Fig. 1. Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)

Workshops: Preventive elements	Description	Explanation
1. Why students participate in sexting?	In the first part of the workshop, students are motivated to express their opinions on why some people participate in sexting. In the second part, teachers present the results of the study on why young people participate in sexting and inform them about the goals of the prevention program	The first workshop lays the necessary groundwork for the program by identifying students' reasons and motives for participating in sexting, raising students' awareness of the motivation for sexting, and informing them about the goals and structure of the prevention program
2. Definition of sexting, attitudes toward sexting and consequences of sexting	The second workshop offers real-life stories about adolescents' sexting experiences. Students' attitudes toward sexting are explored through debate. Students are educated about the negative consequences of sexting through real-life stories in the form of video clips. The video clips will be used to initiate a discussion about the negative consequences of sexting behaviour. All activities take place in groups	Stories are used to initiate discussion about sexting behaviours (definition of sexting, motivation for sexting, attitudes toward sexting, consensual vs. non-consensual sexting, and consequences of sexting). Because sexting is a function of attitudes and norms (Dodaj et al., in press; Hudson and Fetro, 2015; Liong and Cheng, 2017; Walrave et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2021), this workshop aims to: raise students' awareness of positive and negative attitudes towards sexting behaviour; and negative consequences of participating in sexting (insults and humiliation, reputational damage, social exclusion, emotional consequences, etc.) using video materials based on real experiences of adolescents
3. Feelings and another's perspective: empathy training	Students explore different perspectives on sexting (gender perspective, femininity/masculinity, double standards based on gender, consensual/non-consensual, students' reactions in situations of non-consensual forwarding of sexts – support/rejection). Participants are given two stories about non-consensual sexting (one from a girl's perspective/experience and one from a boy's perspective/experience). Elements of empathy training include perspective taking (the tendency to spontaneously place oneself in the psychological view of others), fantasy – the tendency to place oneself in the victim's feelings and actions – and empathic concern – "other-directed" feelings of sympathy and concern for the victim. To promote empathic responding, participants are asked to read five short vignettes	It is critical to take multiple perspectives, including associated feelings, and to train students in empathic reactions in particular, as those prone to sexting (primarily non-consensual) have been shown to have deficits in the emotional domain (Dodaj and Sesar, 2020a). Previously established double standards and different norms for boys and girls related to sexting are also highlighted (girls are more exposed than boys to criticism and "slut-shaming" if they accept an invitation to send a sexual image; at the same time, sharing sexual images is more often normalised among boys) (Agnew, 2021; Dodaj et al., 2022)
4. Roles of participants: role play	Students experience different roles in sexting behaviour	This workshop teaches about different roles in sexting (the person whose content was forwarded without consent, the person forwarding the content, followers of the person who forwarded without consent, passive participants/observers, helpers, etc.) (Bradley et al., 2020; Dodaj and Sesar, 2020b; Klettke et al., 2014; Milton et al., 2019), offers an opportunity to take another person's perspective, and provides knowledge about role-specific contributions to reducing/supporting non-consensual sexting (e.g. by changing the values and culture of sexting)
5. Internet safety: peer teaching	More experienced and mentored students teach their classmates about risky behaviour on the Internet and how to protect themselves (safe Internet connection, creating a secure password, protecting confidential information, safe behaviour on cell phones, self-protective behaviour in the social media, etc.)	When high school students apply the program's content, its goals are met by students who are more accepting than the target group (Siegle, 2010), which also improves the transmission of knowledge and values. In addition, tutors/mentors in this module experience a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and expand the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987)
6. Legal consequences: moral dilemmas	In an interactive environment, the class explores the legal consequences of sexting	This workshop aims to inform students about the legal options and consequences of sexting (e.g. a person who abuses a relationship of trust and, without the consent of the person recorded, makes available to a third party for personal use a recording with sexual content that was recorded with that person's consent, thereby violating that person's privacy, shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than one year, by https://www.zakon.hr/z/98/Kazneni-zakon) and to improve students' moral skills because low levels of morality are a significant risk factor for sexting (Califano et al., 2022; Crimmins and Seigfried-Spellar, 2017). The workshop may be held in the presence of a lawyer or someone familiar with sexting legislation
7. Event for parents: students inform parents	Prepared students educate their parents about digital technology and sexting	On the one hand, this workshop serves as a source of information for parents. On the other hand, it motivates students to gather information about digital technology and sexting and to think about these facts for themselves. Thus, this workshop supports student participation, self-organisation, and empowerment
8. Reflection: psychoeducation	Students review the content of the program	The final workshop provides an opportunity to consolidate and reflect on the knowledge and skills acquired during the program

Tab. 1. Sexting preventive workshops

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implementation, and a familiar learning environment that ensures student attention.

The proposed program is based on various developmental psychology concepts and empirical findings in this area of research. However, the core of the theoretical background is best reflected by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), as shown in Fig. 1. According to the TPB, voluntary behaviours, such as participation in sexting, are best predicted by behavioural intention. Behavioural intention indicates how much effort a person is willing to invest in a particular behaviour. It is determined by a person's attitude (A; i.e. evaluation of the advantageousness of the behavioural outcome), perceived subjective norms (SN; i.e. perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a behaviour), and perceived behavioural control (PBC; i.e. perceived ability to perform a particular behaviour) (Ajzen, 1991). In addition to antecedents specific to the three TPB concepts above, individual (demographic characteristics, personality traits, emotions, intelligence) and environmental (cultural beliefs, religion, laws, economics, and media) background factors may also influence the beliefs individuals hold about a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Walrave et al. (2014) reported that the subjective norm was the most important predictor of sexting behaviour, followed by attitudes toward sexting among adolescents. A significant but weak association with teen sexting intentions is perceived behavioural control. Within the subjective norm, friends and romantic partners represent the most important sources of social pressure, while only positive behavioural outcomes influence teens' sexting intentions. The most important control belief affecting adolescents' sexting intentions is the belief that sexting is relatively more likely to occur among those whom adolescents feel they can trust completely. Liong and Cheng (2017) examined the gender effects on sexting based on the TPB. A mediation analysis showed that males had higher levels of attitude, subjective norm, and self-efficacy related to sexting compared to females, and therefore had a stronger tendency to sext.

An important factor that may influence sexting behaviour is the age of individuals who participate in sexting (Galovan et al., 2018; Reed et al., 2020). In general, higher rates of sexting behaviour have been reported among older adolescents and young adults compared to younger adolescents (Dake et al., 2012; Klettke et al., 2014; Madigan et al., 2018; Strassberg et al., 2013). Some studies showed a higher prevalence in younger adults compared to older adults (Wysocki and Childers, 2011). Compared to adults, adolescents may be more vulnerable in sexting contexts due to the fact that they are still in the phase of physical, cognitive, and social development (Burén and Lunde, 2018). For example, the term "adolescent egocentrism" has been used to describe adolescents' tendency to feel more self-conscious and sensitive to other people's opinions and feedback (Alberts et al., 2007). Adolescence is also characterised by omnipotence, which is related to feelings of invulnerability and a tendency to take risks (Burén and Lunde, 2018).

The rationale for this theoretical approach stems from the studies that have successfully explained sexting behaviour or its component using this model (Dodaj et al., in press; Hudson and Fetro, 2015; Liong and Cheng, 2017; Walrave et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2021). Portions of the program were also developed in accordance with the recommendations included in Ojeda and Del Rey's (2022) systematic review of sexting prevention research. The authors note that different studies suggest prevention interventions by different institutions (e.g. health, policy, law, society, etc.) (Ahern and Mechling, 2013; Döring, 2014; Houck et al., 2014; McEachern et al., 2012; Strassberg et al., 2013), but most studies (Ferrari et al., 2016; Gregg et al., 2018; McEachern et al., 2012; West et al., 2014) agree that schools are the most practical setting for prevention interventions. Proposed prevention interventions include promoting safe and healthy use of technology, the Internet, and the social media; raising awareness about the consequences and risks of sexting; encouraging sexual ethics; increasing awareness of gender roles and stereotypes; and addressing adolescents' perceptions and experiences that fit within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour about the influence of attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioural control on sexting behaviour.

Based on this model, we seek to reduce the negative psychological aspects of sexting through the development of knowledge and skills. This includes psychoeducation about sexting definitions, legal rights, and social skills training, such as empathy. In addition, the program focuses on attitudes toward targeted behaviour. This includes raising students' awareness of the negative consequences of sexting. At the same time, the proposed program seeks to change existing norms in line with the program's goals, which include, for example, improving social responsibility or the overall school climate. Finally, the program aims to improve students' perceptions of their ability to control their own behaviour. This includes providing information about online protection strategies and support strategies for themselves and others when confronted with the negative aspects of sexting. According to the theoretical model, all of these aspects lead to the intention and ultimate realization of the targeted behaviour, i.e. a reduction in sexting behaviour.

The content of this theoretical model can be translated into a 6-month program based on 45-minute sessions, with two sessions held per month. The inclusion criterion is defined as an age range between 14 and 18 years. The tutor of the prevention program is a person who has additional knowledge in the areas of developmental psychology, prevention, and online bullying and has good presentation and communication skills (psychologist, social worker). As part of the workshop, there is an opportunity to conduct a session with law enforcement officers. The sessions take place in a classroom setting.

As shown in Tab. 1, the program includes sequential workshops that differ in content and use proven elements of prevention. In summary, researchers need to promote program development and evaluation. They could focus on training

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teachers and psychologists to implement the above proposal. After the training, they can conduct workshops and compare the groups that completed the program with the groups that did not complete it on various parameters, such as the frequency of sexting, level of empathy, self-esteem, and the like.

Conflict of interest

The authors do not report any financial or personal affiliations to persons or organisations that could adversely affect the content of or claim to have rights to this publication.

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