

EDITORIALS

'Sexting' and parents

La Mesa event offers tips on protecting children from new dangers

It's called "sexting," and parents who don't know what it is should just ask the nearest adolescent. Be prepared for a generational shock.

Sexting is the use of a cell phone to send risqué messages and images, frequently nude photos. The youthful sender and receiver typically are romantically inclined and often at least one of the parties hopes the conversation may lead to sex.

There's a whole coded language of acronyms to go along with it, Tony Torres, a detective with the Sheriff's Department and a member of the Internet Crimes Against Children task force, told a recent parents forum in La Mesa. "PIR" stands for "parent in room" and "p911" for parent alert. Oh, yes, there are other acronyms for "drop your pants" and "send nude picture."

Torres was one of five speakers, the others dealing with more serious threats to children such as abductions by violent sexual predators ("stranger danger"), the much more common sexual molestation by individuals known to the child, the risks of starting relationships on the Internet and gangs in San Diego County coercing young females into prostitution.

The youthful exuberance that is evident in sexting, Torres said, is not something law enforcement wants to spend much time on. Police have no desire to interrogate or arrest the young messengers.

But sexting may go to a whole new level, he said,

when the relationship ends and a jilted party posts the images on the Internet for the world to see and for pedophiles to collect. "Once you hit the send button," he reminded parents, "you can never get it back."

What's a parent to do? Twenty years ago, no parent could have dreamed that their teenager would unthinkingly make nude photos of herself available to the whole world.

Deputy District Attorney Phyllis Schess said parents should find out who is involved in their kids' lives and listen for hints of inappropriate conduct. They should talk about sexual issues with their children, insist that organizations do background checks on volunteers and report incidents to police. And, yes, they should look at their child's texts – "there is no Fourth Amendment right (against search and seizure) for your kid."

La Mesa sponsored the forum at the suggestion of Councilman Ernie Ewin and the unanimous vote of the City Council. "Given the events of the past year," said Police Chief Alan Lanning, "we felt the time was right to educate the community about sex offenders and related topics."

La Mesa plans to repeat the event in school settings during the school year. We hope that other communities consider conducting their own forums.

In today's world, parents need all the help they can get.