

## A young girl's sexting trauma:

# "I was naked, out in the world"

Teen sexting is happening everywhere. This is how one family survived total exposure. By Sandy M. Fernández

**C**an I have a video?" When the message flashed on then-13-year-old Taylor Sullivan's\* cell-phone screen late on a Saturday night in February 2009, she didn't understand the question. It was midnight, and Taylor—a slate-eyed seventh-grader who loved sports, dancing, and animals—was in her pajamas, watching *That's So Raven* and texting a boy from school, a class clown type who, she hoped, "might want to be my boyfriend." She'd never dated anyone before.

"Video of what?" she typed. Everyone else in the house had gone to bed. But Taylor—kept awake by the pinging messages—had come back to the living room.

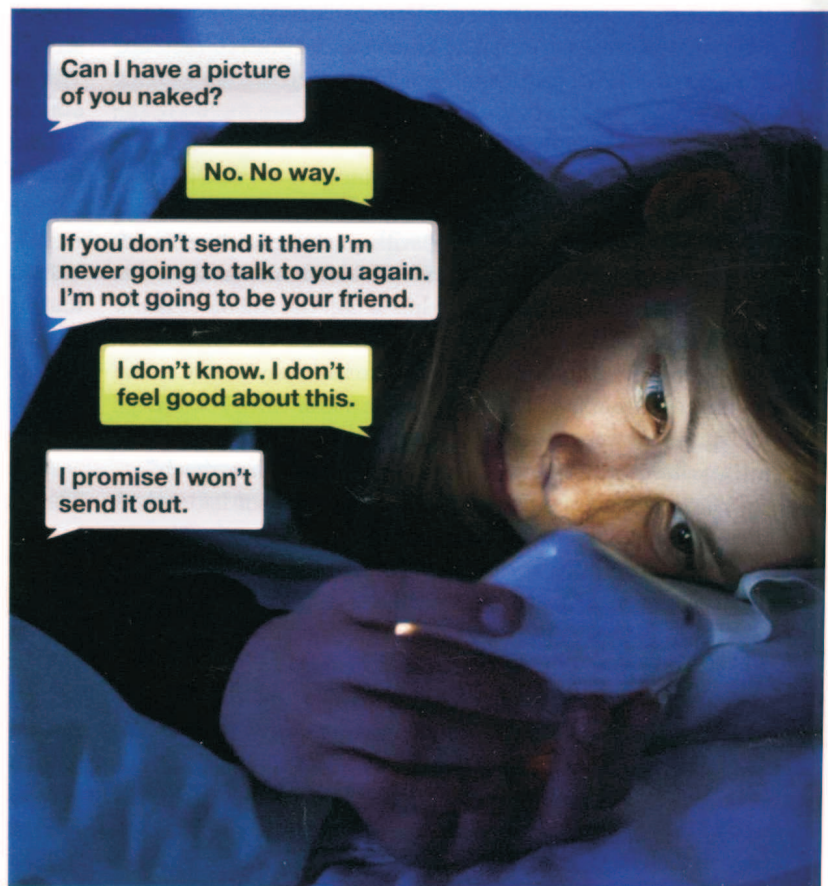
"You stripping," came the answer.

Taylor's immediate response was "No, no way." In the last few months it had become a trend among the boys at her large suburban middle school to ask for sexy cell-phone photos. Taylor had friends who'd sent some, the savvier ones framing themselves in the mirror so their bodies, not their faces, showed. She had even tested out a couple shots herself. She knew the risks: Guys rarely kept these to themselves. Still, she liked this boy. And he swore it would be just between the two of them. "I didn't know what to do," Taylor says. "So I'd say, 'I don't know. I don't feel good about this.' And he'd be like, 'Please?'"

It's two years later, and we're sitting on the back porch of her family's rental in Ohio. It's chilly, and Taylor's in shorts, so she's curled up on her chair, hands tucked into the sleeves of her pink sweatshirt. Her brother, Kyle, 18, and younger sister, Jessica, 10, are fooling with something in the garage. Amy, her mom, is in the kitchen, doing dishes and probably eavesdropping.

That night in seventh grade, Taylor tried simply turning off her phone. When she couldn't resist turning it back on 45 minutes later, she had 53 new messages. In some, her classmate outright "begged," she says. In others, he implied he wouldn't be interested in her—or even be her friend—if she didn't do as he asked.

So, feeling cornered and not wanting to "aggravate" the situation, Taylor went into her brightly lit bathroom, set her phone, recording, on a counter, and hurriedly shed her clothes—shorts, tank top,



underwear—until she was, as the boy had requested, "all naked."

"People who saw it later said they could tell on my face that I didn't want to do it," she says today. "Once it was over, I didn't even watch it. I just sent it and then I deleted it."

It's hard to believe, but experts say the number-one reason boys and girls give for sexting a racy photo of themselves is this: Someone asked, and they didn't know how to say no. "They worry they'll anger the other person or get dumped," says Linda Criddle, founder of the Internet safety organization Look Both Ways. A 2009 MTV-AP study found that 61 percent of those who have sexted had been pressured at some point. In the eyes of many experts, Taylor was the victim here, coerced into sending the video and now vulnerable

to more bullying, as well as sexual harassment, depression, even suicide. In the eyes of the law, though, she'd become a criminal.

## Caught on camera

Kids' sexting has been terrifying and befuddling adults since it took off in the late '00s, when unlimited data plans armed a generation of teens and tweens with cell-phone cameras. No one knows how many kids are actually doing it: One study reported 20 percent of teens, another 4 percent. (In both cases, a larger group admitted to forwarding someone else's photo.) But the numbers aren't the only murky part. Because the images are, by definition, child pornography, in most jurisdictions sexting by kids—be it sharing a self-portrait or forwarding one—is a felony, an adult crime punishable with jail time and mandatory registration as a sex offender. Yet it's clear that kids like Taylor and even her crush are different from the sleazebags on *To Catch a Predator*. Stakeholders on all sides of the issue—parents, educators, researchers, and prosecutors—are learning that it's tough to punish and deter teen sexting without destroying young lives in the process.

So how does a family survive a sexting scandal? The Sullivans were about to find out, with the help of a unique program in Ohio created to protect kids from the cruelest penalties of the criminal justice system. It launched in 2009 with a simple goal: to educate, not prosecute, teens who have made a bad judgment call.

About two weeks after Taylor hit "send," the middle school's principal phoned her mom at work. "There's a video that your daughter made going around school," he told Amy tersely as she sat in her cubicle. "We're bringing in the police."

"Numbness went through my body," Amy says. "I thought, *How did this happen?* Taylor was already going through so much."

In fact, the whole family was stressed. The recession had rocked their blue-collar town, where many people work in manufacturing or at a military base. The local plant closed, so Amy's second husband, John—who'd gone to work there right out of high school—had to take a lower-paying job. Now their house was sliding toward foreclosure. Meanwhile, the girls' longtime dance teacher, Sherry, whom Taylor calls her "second mom," had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer.

After the call, Amy's mind ran to her tight-knit family, all of whom live in the area. "I knew they'd support Taylor but come down on me," she says. "My brothers don't have teens yet, so they always have an opinion about how I should raise mine: 'Why didn't you—?' 'You should have—' The thing is, I knew we'd taught Taylor better than that."

A few months before, Amy recalled, Taylor had shown her a text from a boy asking for a naked picture. Amy had been grossed out, but not alarmed. It seemed like such a ridiculous request, and her daughter had brought it straight to her. They'd laughed

about the message and then sent off a joke photo of their dog. Amy felt she'd warned Taylor a million times not to send out anything personal; she also normally took her daughter's phone every evening. "She knew what she did was wrong," Amy says. "So I have to admit I was a little mad, too."

Amy characterizes Taylor as the kind of girl who "clams up" when she's hurting, but not that night. When Amy got home from work, Taylor met her at the door, sobbing. "She said, 'Mom, I can show you my phone; there must be hours' worth of texts from that night,'" Amy recounts. "We try to stress personal responsibility with the kids, so my first thing was: Yes, but you sent the video. But I also felt bad for her. Taylor was going to be judged for this, but the boy who had pressured her wouldn't be. It was so unfair."

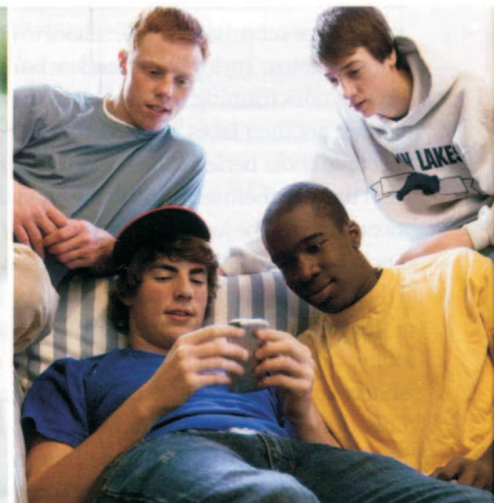
She was right: Taylor was rendered an outcast almost immediately. Outraged by what she had done, the other girls on her team [to protect her identity, REDBOOK cannot reveal her chosen sport] had turned her in by taking the video to their coach. The video had blazed its way not only through her school but two others—possibly three—including her brother's high school.

The night her mom found out, "Taylor hugged me and said she was sorry," Amy recalls. "She cried, and I held her for a while." Taylor's stepfather tried to comfort her too. "It's not the end of the world," he said. "We'll deal with this."

"I don't like letting down my mom," says Taylor now. She sensed that Amy's main emotion wasn't anger. "She was embarrassed," she says softly. "I was naked, out in the world."

At the time, none of them could have imagined the possible penalties, Amy says. "Our biggest fear was that she'd have to go to juvenile court. That seemed awful enough."

Amy told Taylor they'd have to wait to hear from the police. Then she grounded her for a month.



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FROM LEFT: DON KENYON/GETTY IMAGES, ALLAN H. SHOEMAKE/GETTY IMAGES, PATRICK BYRD/GETTY IMAGES

## Adult laws used against kids

Researchers and educators who study sexting agree that sending out a risqué photo or video is, at worst, a plea for attention or a self-harming behavior, like cutting—it means a kid needs help, not jail time. “These laws were never, ever meant to be used against teens sending consensual images,” says J. Tom Morgan, a prosecutor who helped craft some of the original child pornography laws passed to protect children. “They were meant for adults preying on children. Kids suffer enough in this situation.” Any punishment, experts say, should focus on the kids who forward someone else’s private image without permission—kids like Taylor’s “class clown.”

But law enforcers, for the most part, beg to differ. When a kid gets caught, police tend to threaten the heaviest possible charges—with penalties so high that prosecutors end up wielding outsize power. In Pennsylvania in 2008, for example, three families successfully sued a prosecutor who had badgered their kids into entering his anti-sexting program over photos as tame as a teen in a bathing suit. A Washington, DC, defense lawyer even tells REDBOOK that some police departments use teen sexting as a handy offense when they can’t prove anything else against a “bad seed” kid. It’s quite the cudgel: In many states, a 17-year-old boy with a 16-year-old girlfriend is in for heavier charges for having nude pictures of her on his phone than for having sex with her.

In Taylor’s case, the local police chief called Amy the day after the school’s call with an update: Five kids had admitted to forwarding Taylor’s video. The families were coming to the station the next evening, their visits staggered so they wouldn’t cross paths.

When the Sullivans went in, the cops told them that Taylor had committed a felony. “They said she’d be a tier 2 sex offender, which scared the life out of us,” Amy says. (They also offered to show Amy the video. “Why would I want to see that?” she snapped.)

“I said, ‘Look, I get it. These kids need to know this is severe. But my daughter is 13. Don’t make an example of her and ruin her life.’ And they said, ‘Well, we have this program for first-time offenders...’”

By sheer geographic luck, the Sullivans were eligible for one of the country’s only existing sexting diversion programs for minors. Similar in some respects to alcohol awareness classes for drunk drivers, the Montgomery County program had just launched, after a photo of a local girl went viral and her parents pushed to have the boyfriend

who’d forwarded it thrown in jail. “But *she* took and sent the photo, so she would have been charged too,” says prosecuting attorney Mathias H. Heck Jr. “Technically, the kids had committed a felony, but it was really just immaturity. I thought there ought to be something we could do aside from giving them a criminal record.”

A growing number of prosecutors and legislators across the country feel the same way. Since 2009, at least 14 states have enacted legislation to address minors’ sexting, and related bills have been introduced in at least 21 states this year. Arizona, Connecticut, Texas, Utah, and Vermont have changed their laws to make most consensual sexting between minors a misdemeanor instead of a felony, meaning it can be tried in juvenile court. Similar changes are being debated in Ohio, where the issue is personal for state representative Connie Pillich, the bill’s sponsor. Her children went to the same Cincinnati school as Jessica Logan, an 18-year-old who killed herself in 2008 after her naked photo made the rounds. Many of the pending state bills include an “educational component,” and Montgomery County’s program has become a model nationwide.

Today, Heck’s chief of the juvenile division, Julie A. Bruns, reads the file of every kid hauled in for sexting. If the police investigation concludes that a first-time offender pressed “send” without malice, she offers the diversion program. “Determining malice is a little gray, but there are some bright lines,” Bruns says. “In my opinion, it’s when you forward the message expressly to humiliate someone.” Some examples she cites: a kid putting another’s video up on YouTube; rivals or exes forwarding pictures to parents; or appending notes such as, “Ho alert! Text this to all your friends.” In such instances, sexters are prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Kids who make it into the diversion program can consider themselves lucky: In exchange for not being charged, they agree to check in with a diversion officer weekly, give up cell phone use for six months, do 10 hours of community service, and attend two half-day classes covering issues like good decision making and setting boundaries. “We explore why this or that is not appropriate,” Bruns says. “And we stress consequences. The kids may think, *Oh, it’s not a big deal. It’ll be gone once everything dies down.* Well, not necessarily, because if one person puts it on the Internet, it could resurface 10 or 15 years from now, and then you’re a teacher or a nurse or a mom. We try to get them to think farther ahead than five minutes, which is where 13- and 14-year-olds are thinking.”

Classes are partly taught by a counselor from the local sex-offender treatment program, and some kids even visit a juvenile detention facility. It isn’t therapy; it’s punishment. But it’s better than jail—and vastly better than being labeled a sex offender for life.

### “I felt worthless”

Experts say what’s toughest on a kid caught in a sexting scandal is not being seen naked but the bullying and sexual harassment that follow. Taylor experienced it all: “Every hall I went down, someone called me ‘nasty’ and a slut,” Taylor says. “Kids would say, ‘Here comes the stripper,’ or call me ‘porn star.’” Boys smacked her butt, and her teammates no longer spoke to her. She fantasized about going up to the boy she’d trusted and pouring milk on him, or punching him in the face. He, she says, mostly avoided her. Before



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long, her grades plunged. “[The harassment] pushed me down into a little hole,” she says. “I felt worthless.”

Some days, Taylor spent time in a favored guidance counselor’s office. After school, she sought refuge at her dance studio, where Sherry, now a cancer survivor, made it clear she would accept no bullying. While Taylor focused on just trying to make it through the day, her mother grew concerned about the bigger picture: her daughter’s future, her self-esteem. “I worried about her safety: what boys would think, whether they’d try to take advantage,” Amy says. “She hadn’t even started dating, and we had to think about whether this would get in the way of her falling in love and being happy later.”

Sadly, kids weren’t the only ones behaving badly. Not knowing who Amy was, a fellow middle-schooler’s mom spat out at work one day that she wouldn’t want her son around “that little girl that sent the video” during an upcoming field trip. (“Me neither,” Amy said drily.) Then Taylor was booted out of her team portrait session, allegedly because her uniform was too tight. Not long after, the coach cut her completely, citing grades. “Sports are everything to me,” Taylor says. “I was devastated.”

The scandal took a toll on Taylor’s siblings too: One day, outside the dance studio, three middle-school boys stopped Jessica, then 7, and snickered, “Isn’t your sister the stripper?” Taylor tears up at the memory. “I don’t think she knew about the video till then,” she says. “I don’t want her thinking about me like that. I want her to look up to me.” Taylor wasn’t sleeping well, and she’d stopped caring how she looked. “You know when your kids aren’t taking showers,” Amy says. “If it’d been a couple days, I’d say, ‘Okay, get in the shower.’ But I didn’t do more than that; I didn’t want her to feel yelled at by me too.” Taylor started missing school, saying she was sick.

It took the police two months, until April 2009, to complete their investigation. In the end, eight kids—five boys, three girls—confessed to forwarding the video, including Taylor’s crush. “He’d been texting her from a church youth retreat that night,” says Bruns.

All eight were offered a spot in the diversion program; all took it. Ironically, Taylor ultimately felt more welcome in the program than she did at school. She loved the community service (helping senior citizens), and checking in with her officer gave her “a chance to vent.” Even forfeiting her phone was a blessing, since “people were trashing me at school, but it couldn’t follow me home.”

There were rough spots, however: Her diversion class was packed with the kids who had forwarded her video. “I could feel the hatred,” Taylor says. “They kept looking at me and laughing.” (Bruns is characteristically tough-minded about this. “Sometimes making kids face each other isn’t the worst idea,” she says. “Because they can realize, if they’d been face-to-face with this person, would they have taken their clothes off? No, they wouldn’t have.”)

When Taylor started eighth grade, things at school only got worse. One day she came home with a bruise; a boy had smacked her in the face. Amy called the school—“They didn’t call me,” she points out—and was told that the boy’s mother was deployed, and he was “going through some things.” “They weren’t going to help her in any way,” Amy says. At parent-teacher conferences, she discovered



Taylor had a .2 grade point average. “I said, ‘And I didn’t get a phone call?’ It was like she didn’t exist.”

Amy decided to pull her daughter out of school and let her take classes online. It wasn’t just the grades. “John and I wondered what the rest of her school life would be like,” Amy says. “We wanted her to be able to go to prom, to go to homecoming, to have normalcy. She wasn’t going to get that there. We couldn’t trust she’d be safe with any boy who asked her out.” Any doubts Amy had about her decision vanished as she stood by Taylor’s locker on her last day. “A boy came up and made a lewd comment to her,” Amy says. “I turned around and his eyes got *this* wide. Taylor just said, ‘Mom, it happens all the time.’”

Driving out of the parking lot, Amy gave Taylor permission to flip off the school.

## A chance to start over

Taylor spent the rest of the school year taking classes from her aunt’s house. And she flourished. In addition to being free of the daily harassment, Amy says, “Taylor needed to give herself permission to be smart. She’d never seen herself that way, and away from the other kids, she got to discover that part of herself.” By summer, Taylor had worked her way up to a 3.2 GPA. At that point, Amy called a nearby school and begged for a transfer. “They took her in, and that saved us,” Amy says. “It’s a smaller school with stricter rules, so I know everything that’s happening.”

Taylor has also found a new social life. “I don’t have a lot of friends now, maybe four,” she says. “But they’re the true ones, the strong ones.” In the spring, she even tried out for a varsity sport—and made the team. “I knew my mom had told the school about the video, and I’d been scared that would disqualify me,” she says. “But it didn’t.”

The video still comes up, though. Taylor had her first real boyfriend this year, a football player she dated for nine months. His mother never warmed up to her, a subject that came up one day while Taylor and the boy’s dad were watching football practice. He gingerly asked, Had she once made a certain video...?

“When people ask me about it, I’m honest. So I told him, ‘Yeah, I did it. That was a mistake,’” Taylor recalls. “And he said, ‘I know, sweetie. Don’t worry, I won’t judge you.’”

“It was a big relief. I could finally own up to it without everyone thinking that’s all I’m about,” she says. “Your life goes down a hole, but you get another chance, and it’s like, ‘Whew, thank you.’” **6**

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**Stop sexting before it happens:** For tips on teaching your kids how to respond when pressured for a racy photo, go to [redbookmag.com/teensexting](http://redbookmag.com/teensexting).