

YOUNG CANADIANS' EXPERIENCES WITH ELECTRONIC BULLYING AND SEXTING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Young Canadians' Experiences with Electronic Bullying and Sexting During The COVID-19 Pandemic was made possible by financial contributions from TELUS.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A nationally representative sample of Canadian youth aged 12 to 18 completed an online survey assessing their internet use habits, their experiences of electronic bullying and victimization, motivations and barriers associating with intervening in electronic bullying, and their experiences of sexting since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The results of the survey indicated that:

Internet Use

- Since the pandemic began, girls spent more time than boys using their electronic devices for purposes such as social media, and boys spent more time than girls playing games on their devices.
- Older youth were more likely than younger youth to spend increased time connecting with friends and family since the pandemic began.
- On average, youth obtained their first digital device at age 11 and started using social media at age 12.
- 47% of youth reported that they can talk more easily about their secrets, inner feelings and concerns on the internet than in a face-to-face conversation. Younger youth were more likely than older youth to say that they could talk more easily about secrets online.
- A third of the youth sample reported problematic social media use (behavioural or psychological dependence on social media), which is associated with mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Youth aged 14-15 report significantly higher rates of problematic social media use than other age groups, and boys were more likely than girls to report problematic social media use.

Electronic Bullying

- Electronic bullying is prevalent. In 2020, 40% of youth said they had been electronically bullied at least once (compared to 42% in 2015) in the previous four weeks. The prevalence of experiencing electronic bullying between 2015 and 2020 is very stable across time.
- In 2020, 19% of youth reported electronically bullying others (compared to 15% in 2015) in the previous four weeks. Thus, there was an increase in electronically bullying others over time.
- When the window for experiencing and perpetrating electronic bullying was extended from the past four weeks to the past two months, reports increased considerably: reports of experiencing electronic bullying increased from 40% to 60%, and reports of perpetrating electronic bullying increased from 19% to 64%.
- Younger youth were more likely than older youth to experience electronic bullying.
- Youth who had previously been electronically bullied were significantly more likely to have bullied others electronically compared to their non-bullied peers.

- 52% of youth reported witnessing electronic bullying at least once in the previous four weeks; this is a reduction since 2015 in the youth who witnessed electronic bullying which was 60%. Of those that witnessed electronic bullying, 70% said that they did something to intervene at least once.
- Youth were asked what intervention strategies they thought would be helpful in responding to electronic bullying. Most youth thought it would be helpful to talk about how to handle the bullying with friends or parents, block the sender of the hurtful message and comfort the target privately.
- Youth were asked about the factors that would increase their likelihood of intervening in electronic bullying. They would be motivated to do something about the electronic bullying if it was clearly morally wrong or hurtful. It was also important that something would be done to improve the situation after they intervened, and that the intervention could be done anonymously. Having others' respect for intervening in the electronic bullying was also important, but rewards or praise were not viewed as important for most youth.
- Youth were asked whether or not they agreed with a group of statements about barriers to intervening. Those who had been electronically bullied at least once in the previous four weeks were more likely than non-bullied youth to believe that there would be negative consequences for intervening in electronic bullying.

Sexting Experiences

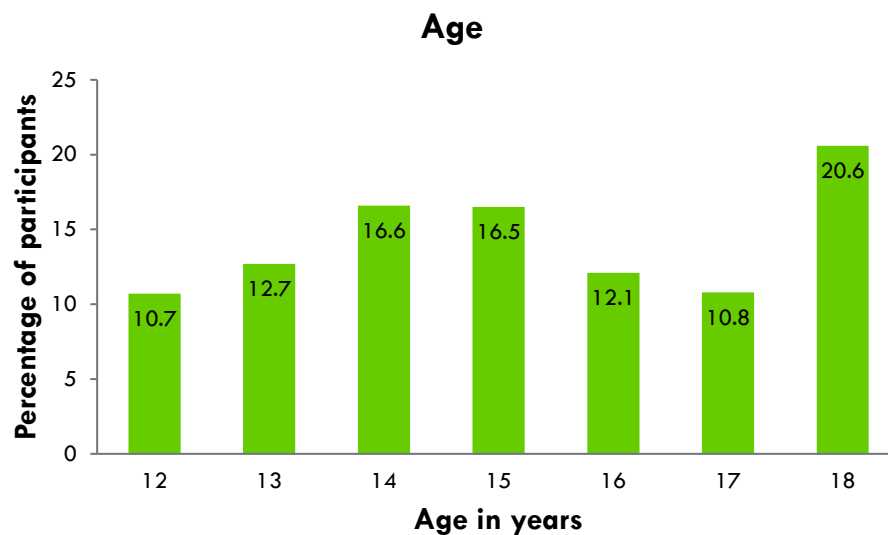
- Sexting is a prevalent behaviour. 56% of youth reported consensually sending sexts to a partner at least once since COVID-19 started. Reports increased significantly with age, with 62% of 16-18-year-olds reporting consensually sexting a partner compared to 36% of 12-13-year-olds.
- 42% of youth said that they had received consensual sexts from a partner at least once since COVID-19 started.
- 33% of youth reported that they had sent non-consensual or unwanted sexts to a partner at least once since COVID-19 started, and 32% of youth reported that they had received non-consensual or unwanted sexts from a partner at least once. 14-15-year-olds were significantly more likely than other age groups to both send non-consensual or unwanted sexts to a partner and receive them from a partner.
- 15% of youth reported that they had forwarded a sexual image and/or video of another individual without the consent of the original sender since COVID-19 started. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to report forwarding sexts without the permission of the original sender.

1. RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

1000 youth participated in the survey. 680 (68%) reported English as their first language.

First Language	% of Sample
English	68%
French	21%
Arabic	1%
Cantonese	2%
Mandarin	1%
Portuguese	0.3%
Spanish	1%
Swahili	0.1%
Tamil	0.4%
Urdu	0.6%
Tagalog	0.9%
Other	3%

- 476 (48%) identified as female, 452 (45%) identified as male, and 5 (1%) preferred not to disclose their gender. 67 (7%) reported that they identified as transgender or genderqueer.
- Participants ranged in age from 12 years to 18 years, with a mean age of 15 (SD = 2.00).



2020 Young Canadians' Experiences with Electronic Bullying and Sexting

All 10 provinces were represented in the sample.

Location	Number of Participants
Ontario	384
Quebec	241
British Columbia	129
Alberta	110
Manitoba	32
Nova Scotia	30
Saskatchewan	27
New Brunswick	24
Newfoundland & Labrador	20
Prince Edward Island	3

Youth were asked to self-identify their race or cultural background, if desired. Two-thirds of the sample identified as White/European-Canadian.

Race / Cultural Identity	% of Sample
White	66.4%
Chinese	6.3%
South Asian (e.g. East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)	5.6%
Black	5.3%
Filipino	2.8%
Latin American	1.8%
Southeast Asian (e.g. Cambodian, Indonesian, Vietnamese)	2.4%
Arab	1.7%
Metis	1.6%
Inuit	0.1%
First Nations	2.1%
Japanese	0.6%
Korean	0.5%
West Asian (e.g. Afghan, Iranian)	0.5%
Other	1.8%
Prefer not to say	0.6%

Youth were asked to report their sexual orientation, if desired. 85% (854) identified as straight or heterosexual.

Sexual Orientation	Number of Participants
Straight or heterosexual	85% (N= 854)
Bisexual	6% (N= 62)
Gay/Lesbian	3% (N= 26)
Queer, pansexual or polysexual	1% (N= 14)
Questioning	1% (N= 11)
Two-spirited	<1% (N= 2)
Other	<1% (N= 4)
Prefer not to answer	3% (N= 27)

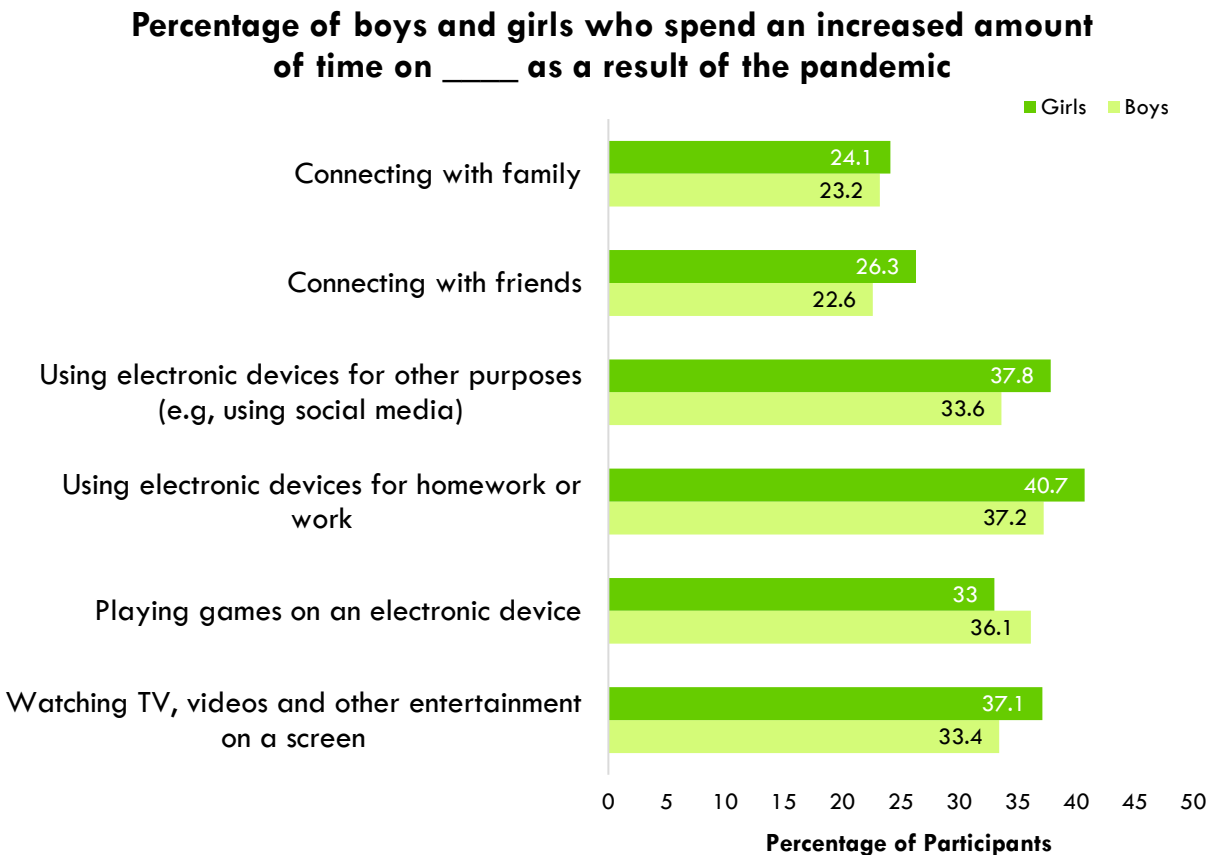
COVID Status

Respondents were asked about their current COVID-19 infection status, including whether they had been previously diagnosed with COVID-19.

- 96% reported that they did not currently have COVID-19
- 1% reported that they suspected they may have COVID-19 but had not been tested
- 1% reported they were waiting for test results for COVID-19.
- 2% reported that they had previously been diagnosed with COVID-19 but had since recovered.

2. INTERNET USE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

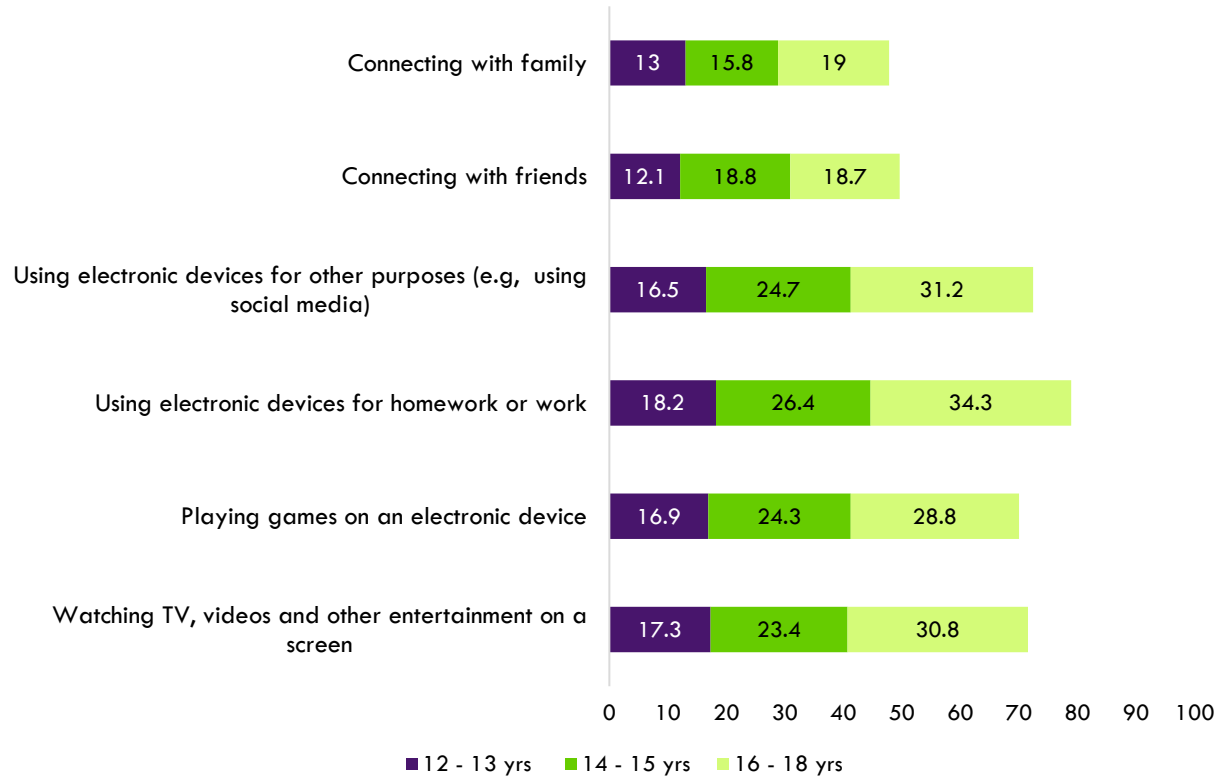
Respondents were asked about how their internet use habits have changed since the pandemic began and the kinds of activities that they take part in on a daily basis.



- Since the pandemic began, girls spent significantly more time than boys using electronic devices for other purposes (e.g., using social media such as Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok).

- On the other hand, boys spent more time playing games on electric devices than girls since the pandemic started¹. There were no significant gender differences for the other activities².

Percent of respondents who spend an increased amount of time on ___ as a result of the pandemic, by age group



- Older youth were significantly more likely than younger youth to report spending an increased amount of time connecting with family³ and friends⁴ since the pandemic began. There were no significant age differences for the other activities⁵.

¹ $\chi^2(1, N = 975) = 6.93, p = .008$

² All $p > .05$

³ $\chi^2(2, N = 989) = 8.48, p = .014$

⁴ $\chi^2(2, N = 990) = 12.90, p = .002$

⁵ All $p > .05$

- Youth were most likely to spend 2 or more hours per day on going to school (in person or online) compared to other daily activities.
- Girls were significantly more likely than boys to spend 2 or more hours per day scrolling through friends' posts on social media⁶, engaging with friends' posts on social media⁷, and being creative (e.g., creating TikTok videos, sharing art, dance, song and writing)⁸. There were no significant gender differences for the other activities⁹.

Percentage of Respondents who spent 2 or more hours per day on

Activity	Percent
Accessing news and information	11.9
Accessing health recommendations/guidelines	9.2
Accessing resources on how to cope (tips and FAQs)	8.2
Accessing personal stories of others affected by COVID	8.5
Connecting with friends	48.5
Connecting with family members	35.1
Watching friends' posts on social media platforms	36.1
Engaging with friends' posts	29.5
Texting or video-chatting with friend(s)	35.5
Finding new hobbies	13.3
Sharing information/posts	17.4
Being creative	23.4
Learning more about current world issues	13.6
Accessing resources for violence you may be experiencing	9.9
Accessing virtual healthcare and telemedicine	8.5
Going to school (in-person or on-line)	77.3
Going to work	15.1
Volunteering	7.5
Online shopping	11.9

⁶ $\chi^2(1, N = 969) = 14.49, p < .001$

⁷ $\chi^2(1, N = 969) = 9.32, p = .002$

⁸ $\chi^2(1, N = 970) = 12.20, p < .001$

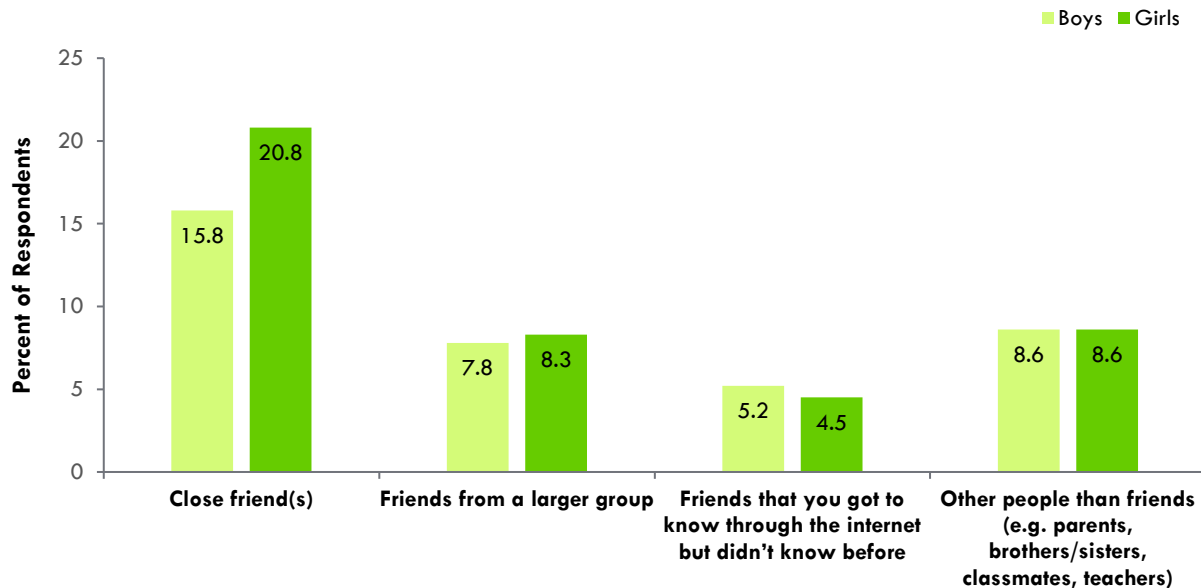
⁹ All $p > .05$

Age of First Digital Device

Youth were asked to report at what age they obtained their first digital device (e.g. smartphone, tablet or computer), as well as when they first started using social media (e.g. Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok). The mean age for first digital device was 11 years old (SD = 2.71) with a range of 1 to 18 years. The mean age for first use of social media was 12 years old (SD = 2.03), with a range of 2 to 18 years.

Respondents reported how often they typically have online contact with their close friends, friends from a larger group, friends that they met through the internet, and other people (e.g. family, classmates, teachers). There were no gender differences in those who spoke to these groups of people several times a day or more¹⁰.

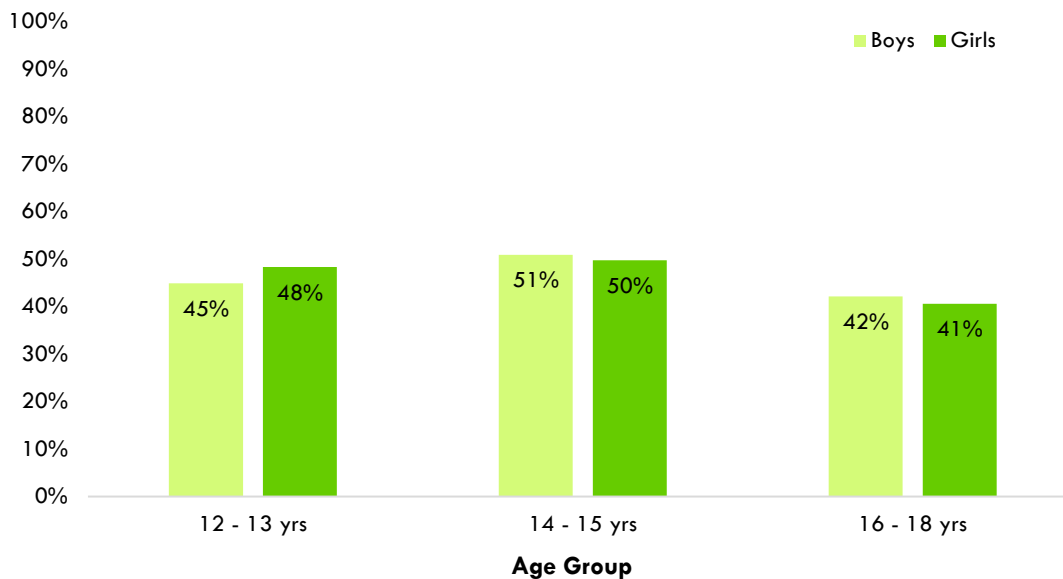
Percent of respondents who have online contact with the following people several times a day or more, by gender



¹⁰ All $p > .05$

46% of youth agreed that they can talk more easily about secrets on the internet than in a face-to-face encounter. Younger youth were significantly more likely than older youth to say that they can talk more easily about secrets on the internet than in a face-to-face encounter¹¹. There were no gender differences¹².

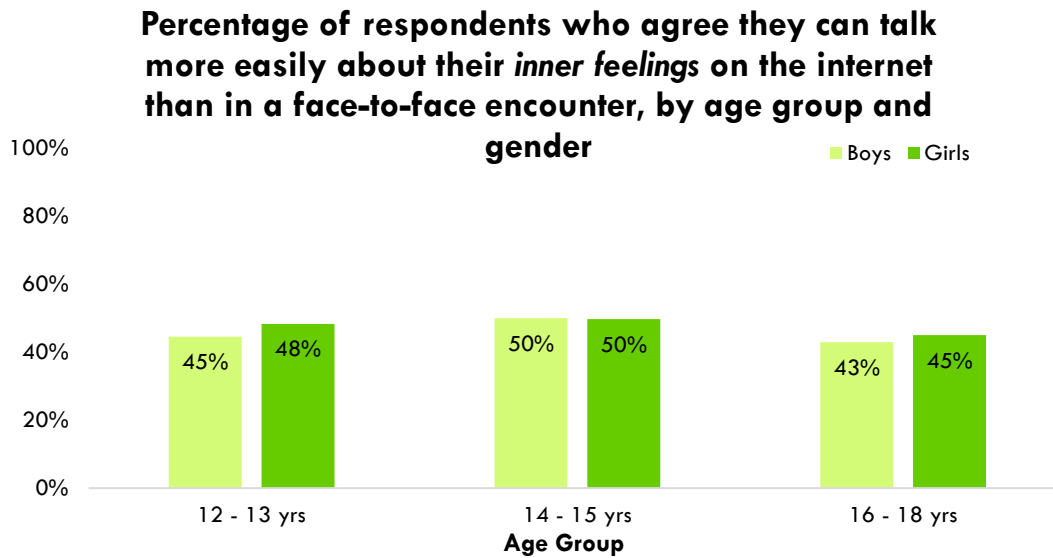
Percentage of respondents who agree they can talk more easily about secrets on the internet than in a face-to-face encounter, by age group and gender



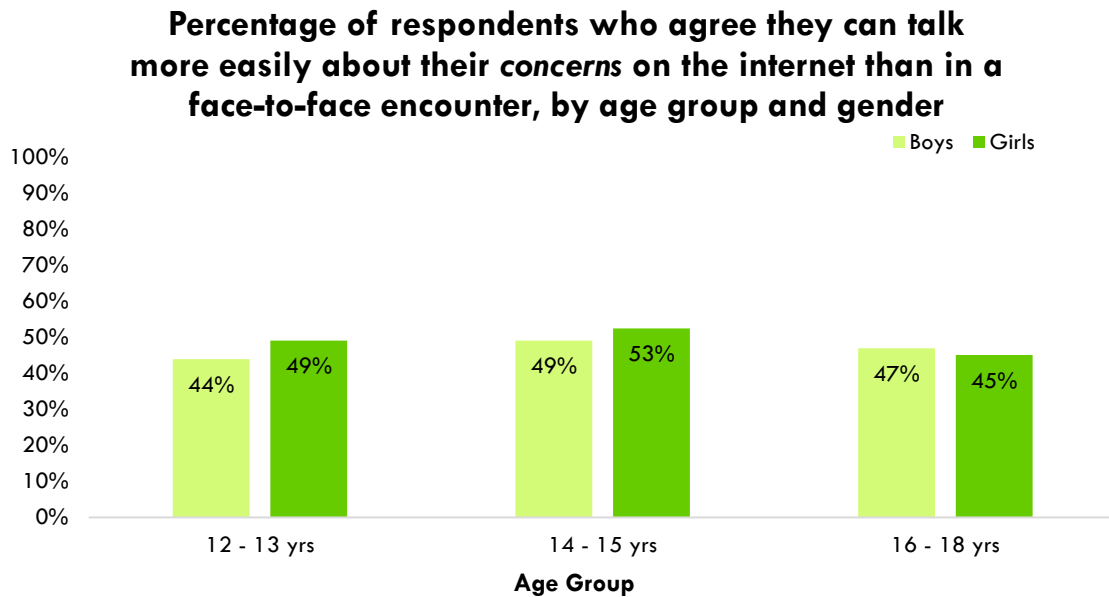
¹¹ $\chi^2(2, N = 970) = 6.511, p = .039$

¹² $p > .05$

47% of youth agreed that they can talk more easily about their inner feelings on the internet than in a face-to-face encounter. There were no age or gender differences¹³.



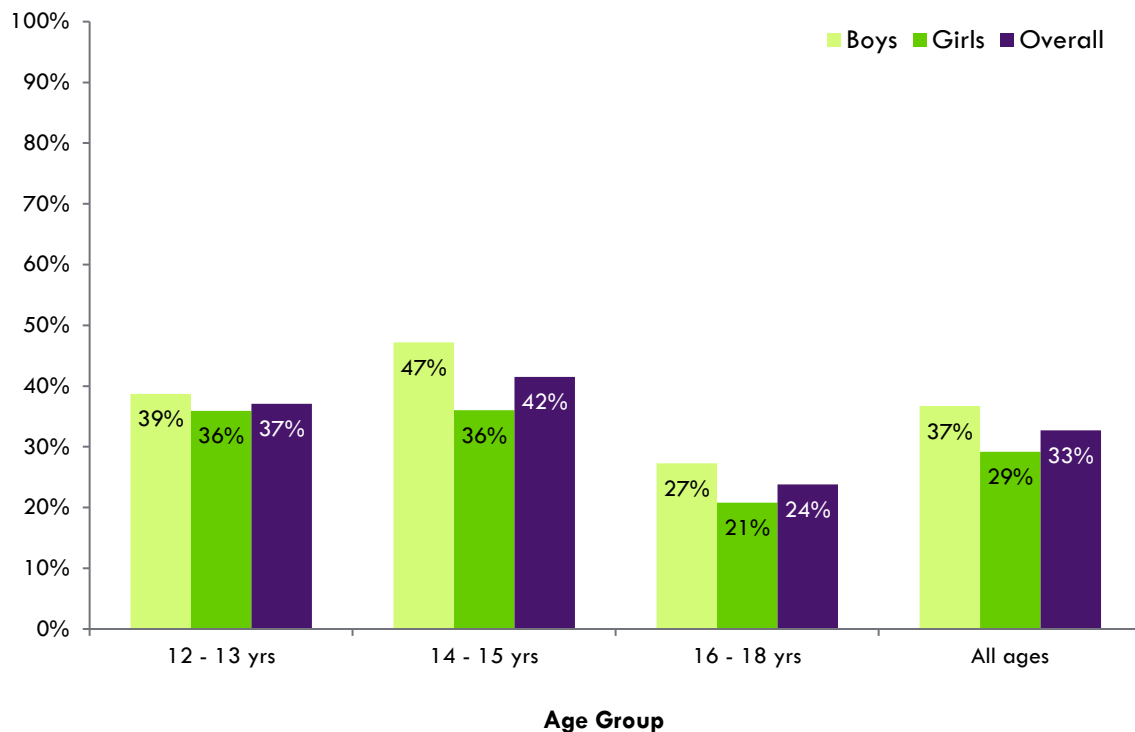
48% of youth agreed that they can talk more easily about their concerns on the internet than in a face-to-face encounter. There were no age or gender differences¹⁴.



¹³ All $p > .05$

¹⁴ All $p > .05$

Percentage of respondents who report problematic social media use, by age and gender



- Problematic social media use refers to the psychological or behavioural dependence on social media.
- Research indicates that problematic social media use is associated with mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.
- One third of the sample reported problematic social media use.
- Youth aged 14-15 report significantly higher rates of problematic media use than other age groups¹⁵.
- Overall, boys were significantly more likely than girls to report problematic social media use¹⁶. There were no significant gender differences within age groups¹⁷.
- Boys aged 14-15 were significantly more likely to report problematic social media use compared to boys in other age groups¹⁸.
- Girls aged 16-18 were significantly less likely to report problematic social media use than younger girls¹⁹.

¹⁵ $\chi^2(2, N = 657) = 20.57, p < .001$

¹⁶ $\chi^2(2, N = 643) = 4.11, p = .043$

¹⁷ All $p > .05$

¹⁸ $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 10.16, p = .006$

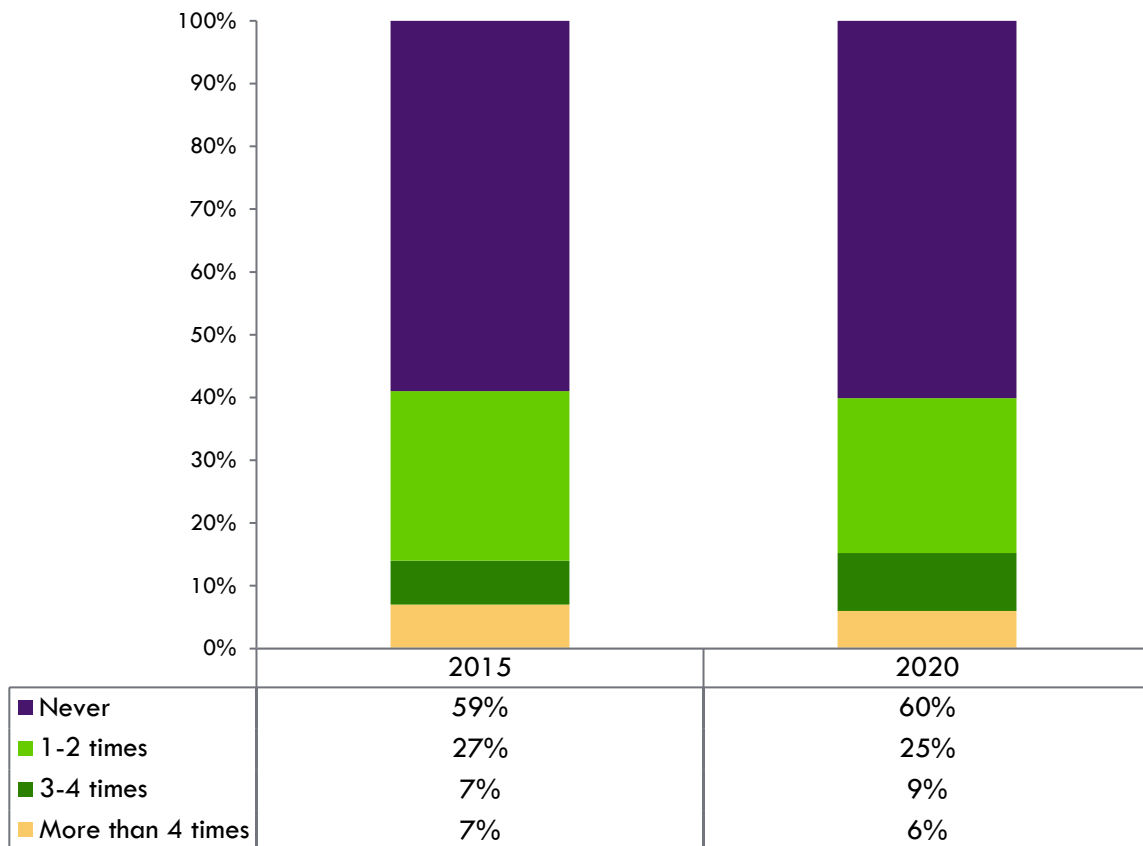
¹⁹ $\chi^2(2, N = 343) = 9.49, p = .009$

3. EXPERIENCES OF ELECTRONIC BULLYING

Respondents were asked about their experiences of electronic bullying, bullying others electronically, or witnessing electronically bullying in the previous four weeks. Electronic bullying includes being threatened, embarrassed, gossiped about, or made to look bad online. Some of these data were compared to previous data on the same topics gathered in 2015.

- In 2020, 40% of youth said they had been electronically bullied at least once (compared to 42% in 2015) in the previous four weeks. The prevalence of experiencing electronic bullying between 2015 and 2020 is very stable across time. This finding is interesting, given the context of COVID when youth are likely spending more time online, yet the prevalence of being electronically bullied is stable. Increased online exposure in COVID is not translating into more electronic bullying.

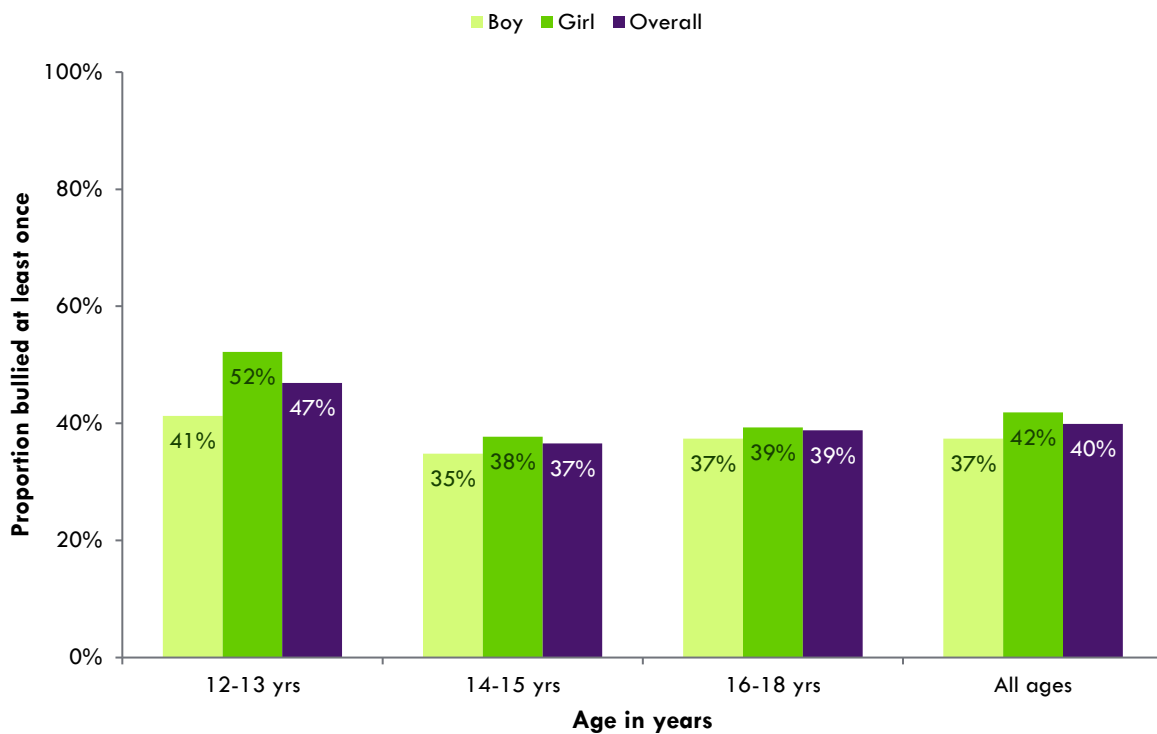
Frequency of being electronically bullied, 2015 vs. 2020



2020 Young Canadians' Experiences with Electronic Bullying and Sexting

- There were no gender differences in terms of youth experiencing electronic bullying²⁰. 37% of boys and 42% of girls reported that they had been electronically bullied in the past four weeks.
- Younger youth were significantly more likely than older youth to experience electronic bullying²¹. 47% of 12-13-year-olds said they had been electronically bullied at least once in the past four weeks, compared to 37% of 14-15-year-olds and 39% of 16-18-year-olds.

Experiences of being electronically bullied, by age and gender



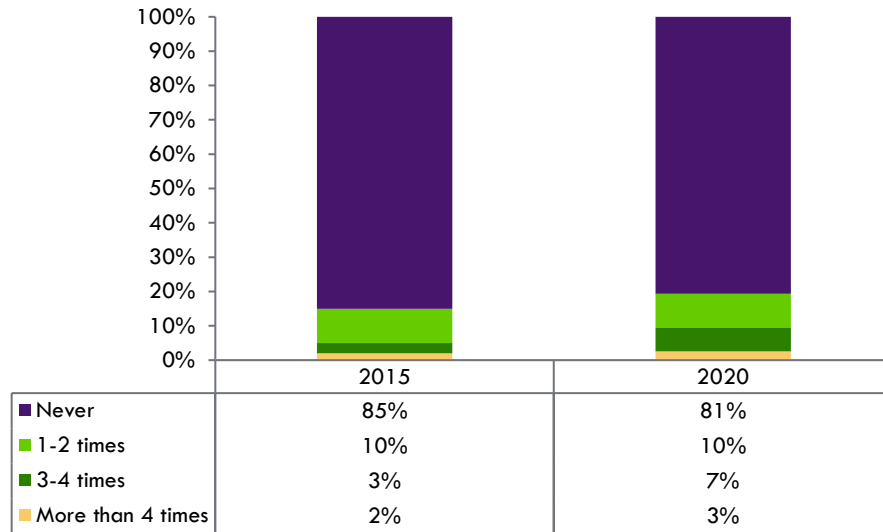
²⁰ $\chi^2(2, N = 958) = 4.51, p = .105$

²¹ $\chi^2(2, N = 964) = 6.33, p = .042$

2020 Young Canadians' Experiences with Electronic Bullying and Sexting

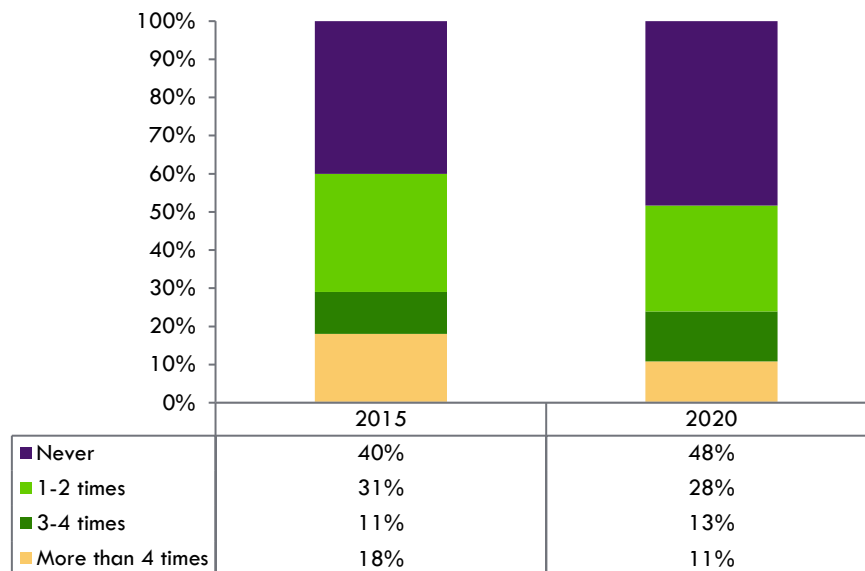
- 19% of youth said they had bullied others electronically at least once (compared to 15% in 2015) in the previous four weeks. Thus, there was an increase in electronically bullying others over time.

Frequency of electronically bullying others, 2015 vs. 2020



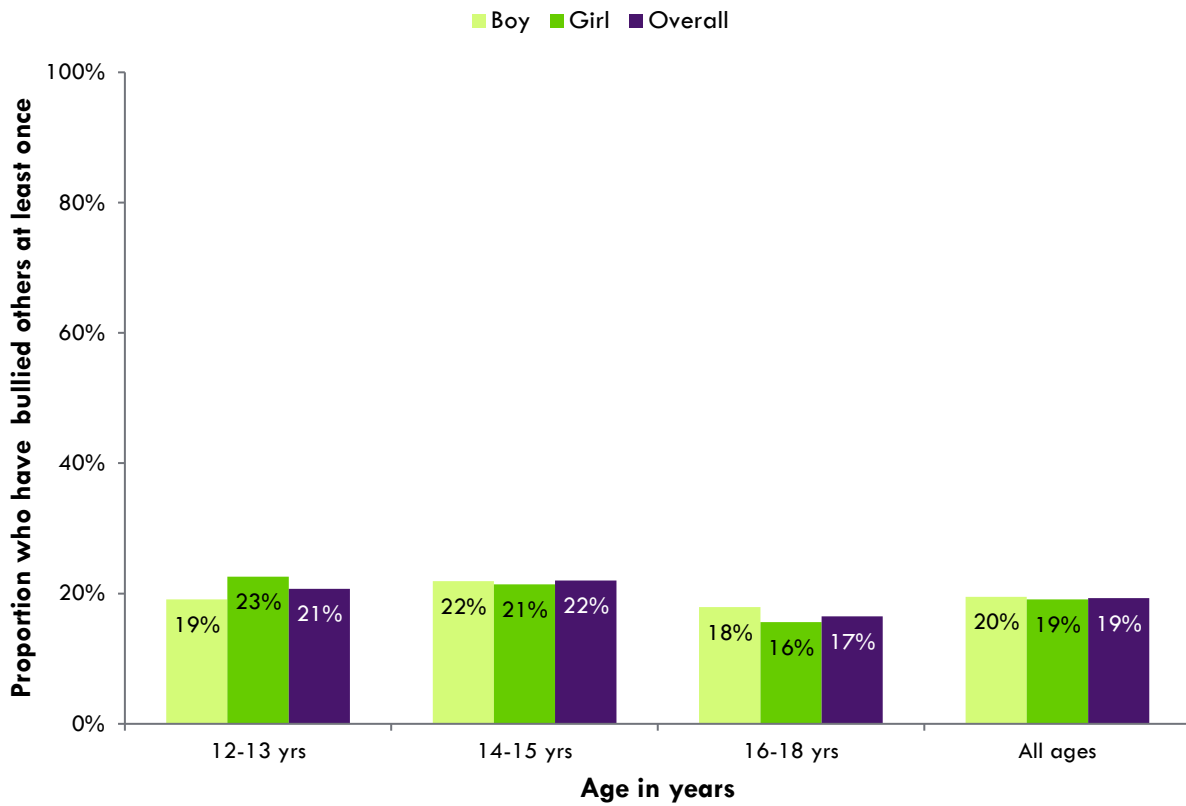
- 52% said they witnessed others being electronically bullied at least once (compared to 60% in 2015) in the previous four weeks.

Frequency of witnessing electronic bullying, 2015 vs. 2020



- There were no gender or age differences in terms of youth electronically bullying others²². 20% of boys and 19% of girls said that they had electronically bullied others at least once in the past four weeks.

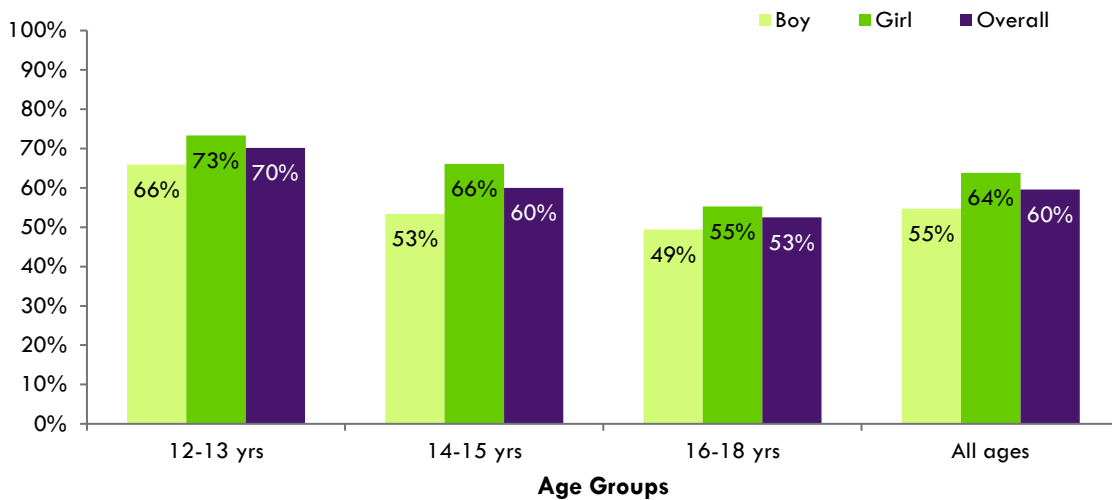
Experiences of electronically bullying others in the past four weeks, by age and gender



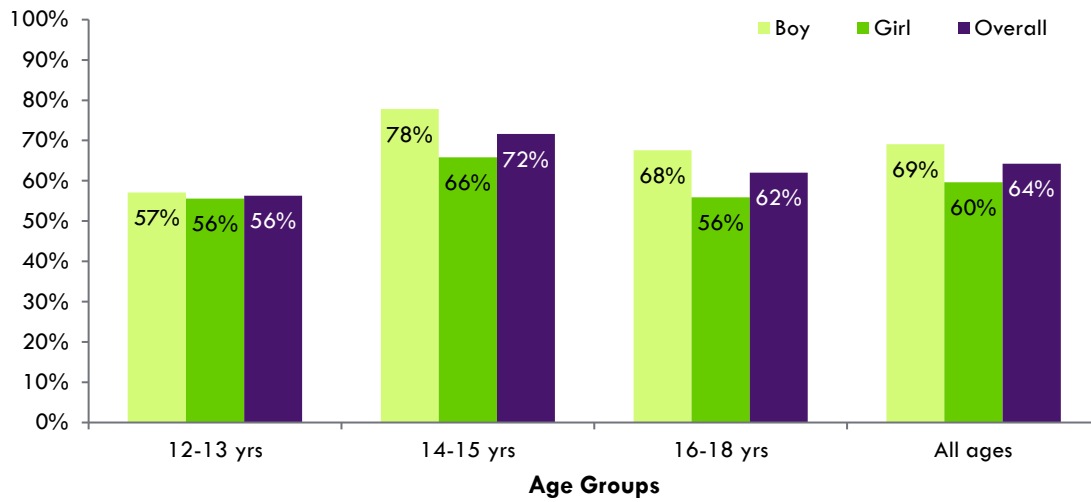
²² Both $p > .05$

Youth were also asked to report their experiences related to electronic bullying in the past two months. When the window of possibility for experiencing and perpetrating electronic bullying was expanded from four weeks to two months, reports of both behaviours increased considerably. This increase may be a function of methodology- increased time frame of when bullying could occur. Overall reports of experiencing electronic bullying increased from 40% to 60%, and overall reports of perpetrating electronic bullying increased from 19% to 64% with this change from a 4-week reference to 2-month reference in time frame.

Experiences of being electronically bullied in the past two months, by age and gender

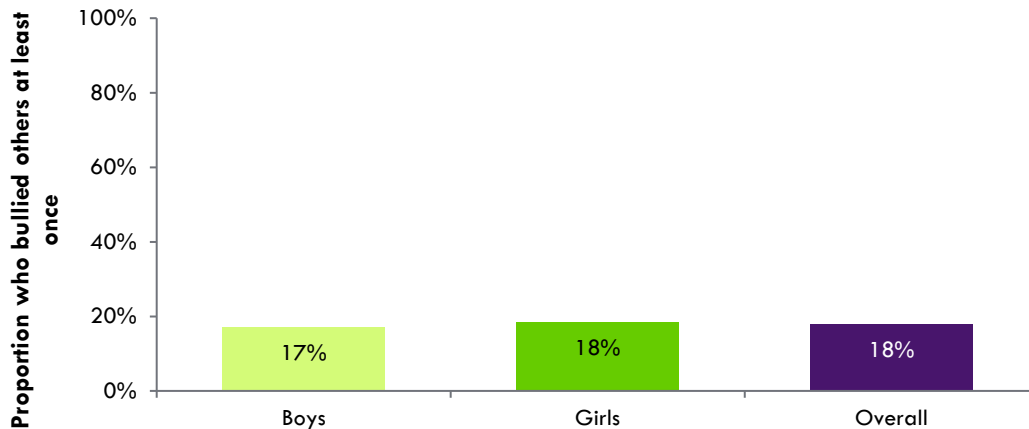


Experiences of electronically bullying others in the past two months, by age and gender



Youth who had previously been electronically bullied were significantly more likely to have bullied others electronically compared to their non-bullied peers²³. This finding was true for both boys and girls, and across all age groups. One percent of non-bullied youth said they had bullied others, while 18% of bullied youth reported bullying others at least once in the past four weeks.

Proportion of previously bullied youth who electronically bullied others in the past four weeks

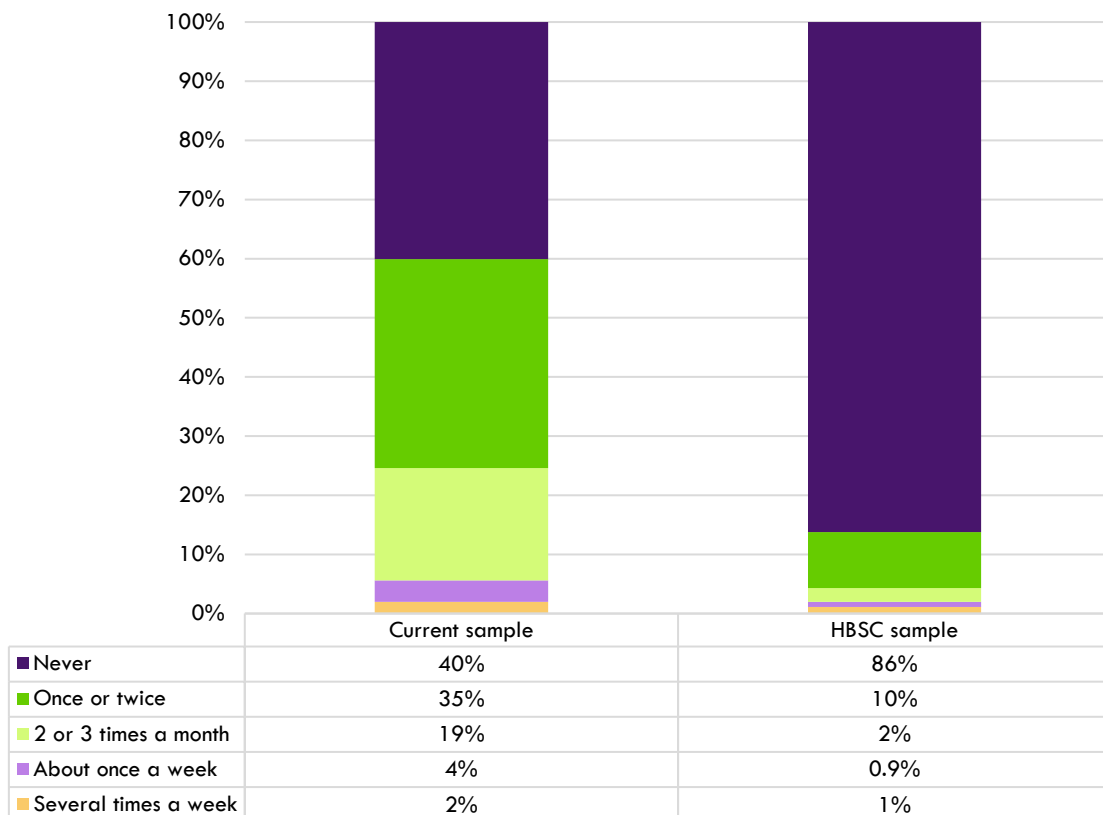


²³ $\chi^2(1, N = 954) = 266.42, p < .001$

2020 Young Canadians' Experiences with Electronic Bullying and Sexting

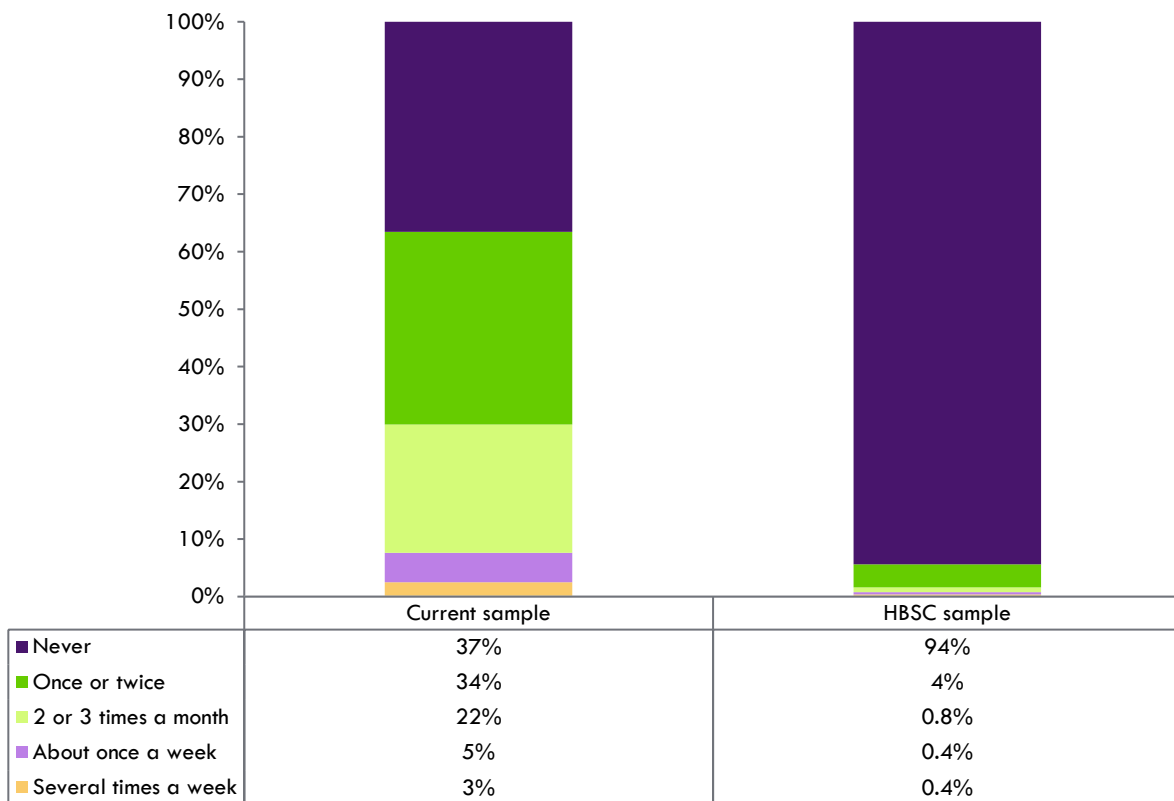
As discussed previously, 60% of youth reported that they had been electronically bullied at least once in the past couple of months. In a June 2020 report on Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) from the Public Health Agency of Canada, only 14% of youth reported that they had been electronically bullied at least once in the past couple of months. The HBSC data were collected in 2017/18. The same question does indicate an increase in electronic bullying, however, the sampling and methodology for these surveys are different. In addition, when the sampling and methodology are the same (with the four-week interval), there is no increase. Thus, it may be important to be cautious when interpreting these results.

Frequency of electronic bullying experiences in the past two months



In the current sample, 64% reported that they had electronically bullied others in the past couple of months. In the June 2020 HBSC report, only 6% of youth reported having electronically bullied others at least once in the past couple of months. The HBSC data were collected in 2017/18. The same methodological caution is also recommended for interpreting these results.

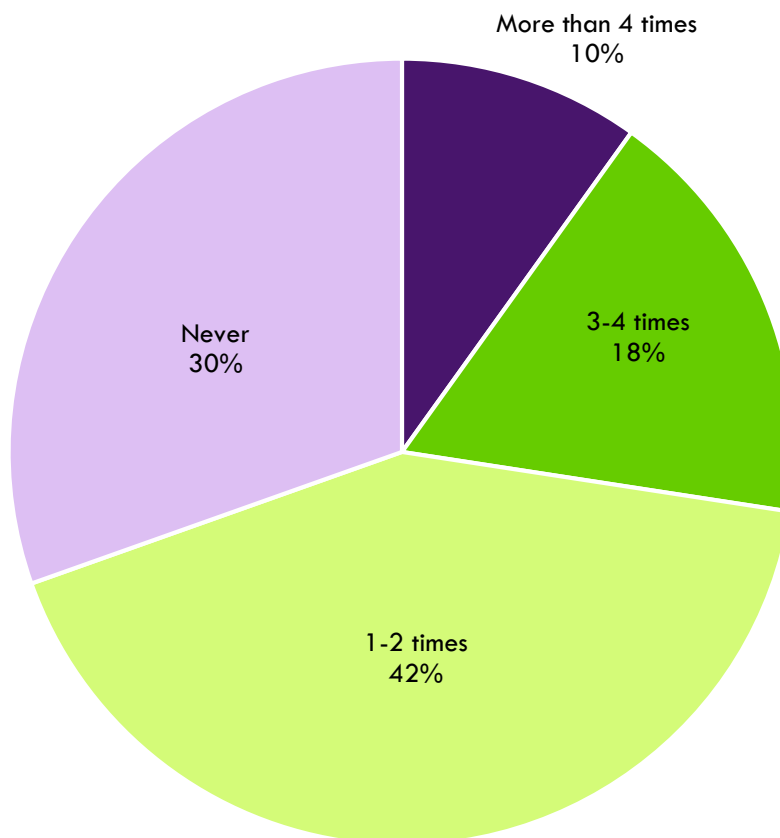
Frequency of electronically bullying others in the past two months



4. INTERVENING IN ELECTRONIC BULLYING

- 52% of youth reported witnessing electronic bullying in the previous four weeks. When youth were asked about what they did when they witnessed electronic bullying, the majority of respondents (70%) said that they had intervened at least once. In 2015, 60% of youth reported witnessing electronic bullying and 71% of youth reported intervening when they witnessed. Thus, in 2020, a smaller percentage of youth witnessed electronic bullying, but the percent of youth who intervened remain relatively constant. This may mean that they are intervening more often when they witness the bullying.

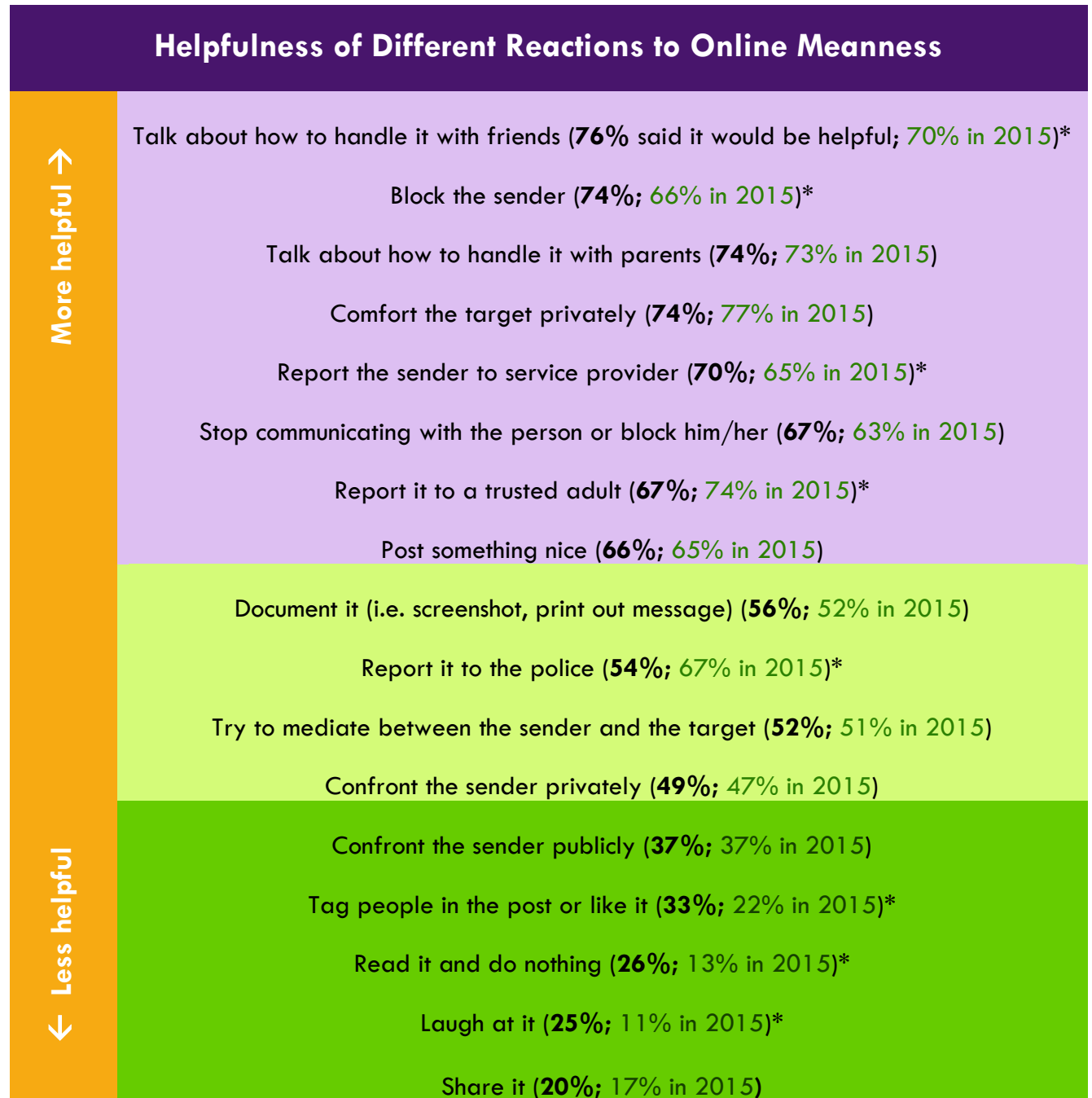
Prevalence of intervening in electronic bullying



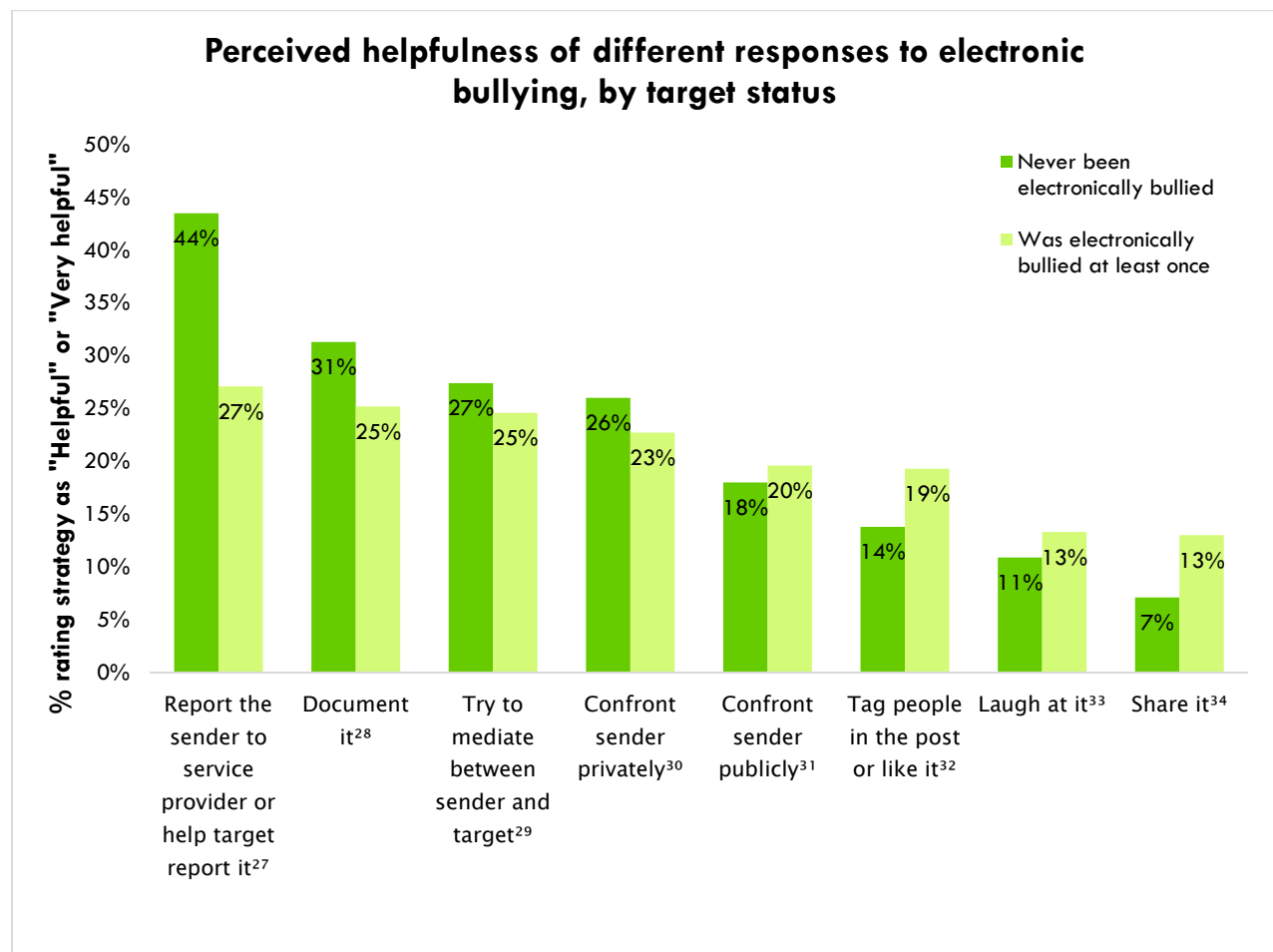
2020 Young Canadians' Experiences with Electronic Bullying and Sexting

Youth were asked what intervention strategies they thought would be helpful in responding to electronic bullying. Most youth thought it would be helpful to talk about how to handle the bullying with friends or parents, block the sender and comfort the target privately. Confronting the sender or interacting with the mean post was not considered to be as helpful.

Compared to 2015, youth in 2020 were more likely to engage in the following helpful responses: talking about it with friends; blocking the sender, reporting to the service provider, reporting it to an adult, and reporting it to the police. On the other hand, compared to 2015, in 2020, they were more likely to engage in these unsupportive responses- tag people in the post or to like it and read or do nothing about it.



Of the 17 possible responses to witnessing electronic bullying, we compared the responses of youth who had experienced electronic bullying in the past four weeks with the responses of youth who had not. For 9 of the responses, there were no differences in perceived helpfulness whether youth had been targeted or not. For 8 of the responses (below), there were significant differences. Youth who had been the target of electronic bullying were less likely to find it helpful to report the sender to a service provider or help the target report the electronic bullying²⁴, document it²⁵, try to mediate between sender and target²⁶, and confront the sender privately²⁷. They were more likely to support confronting the sender publicly²⁸, as well as less productive responses such as tagging people in the hurtful post²⁹, laughing at it³⁰, and sharing it³¹.



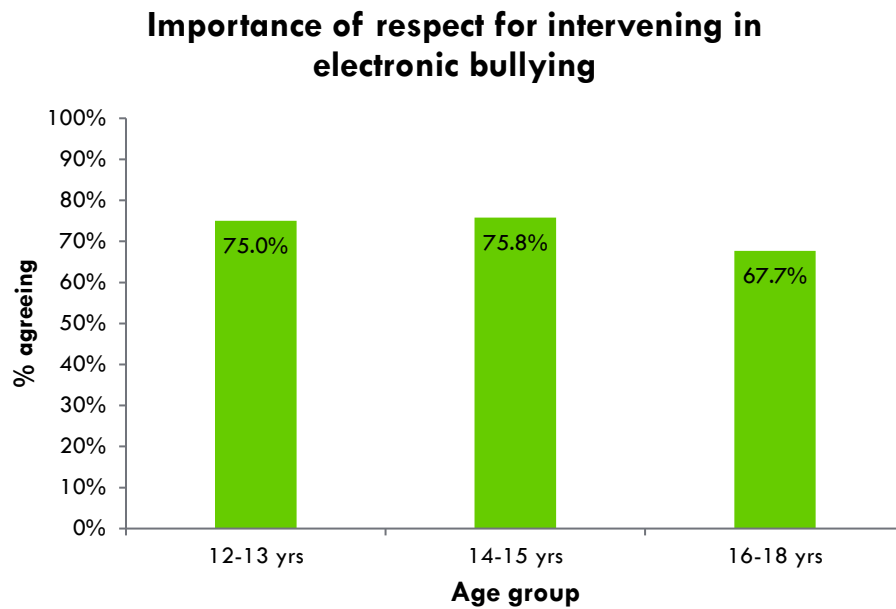
²⁴ $\chi^2(1, N = 932) = 5.00, p = .025$
²⁵ $\chi^2(1, N = 922) = 6.97, p = .008$
²⁶ $\chi^2(1, N = 912) = 19.56, p < .001$
²⁷ $\chi^2(1, N = 930) = 13.37, p < .001$
²⁸ $\chi^2(1, N = 930) = 31.25, p < .001$
²⁹ $\chi^2(1, N = 917) = 55.00, p < .001$
³⁰ $\chi^2(1, N = 930) = 27.81, p < .001$
³¹ $\chi^2(1, N = 938) = 57.86, p < .001$

5. MOTIVATION FOR & BARRIERS TO INTERVENING

Youth were asked about the factors that would increase their likelihood of intervening in electronic bullying. The most important factors were content-related: youth would be motivated to do something about the electronic bullying if it was clearly morally wrong or hurtful. It was also important that something would be done to improve the situation after they intervened, and that the intervention could be done anonymously. Having others' respect for intervening in the electronic bullying was also important, but rewards or praise were not viewed as important for most youth. Interestingly, the only change from 2015 was a larger percentage of youth reported that they would intervene if they would be rewarded or praised for intervening. Schools may want to create a culture when youth are praised for standing up when they see mean comments, posts or pictures online.



Younger youth were more likely to say that they would intervene in electronic bullying if they felt they would be respected for doing so³². They were also more likely than older youth to say that they would intervene if they knew something constructive would be done in the future about the bullying³³. There were no gender differences for any of the motivational factors in intervening³⁴.

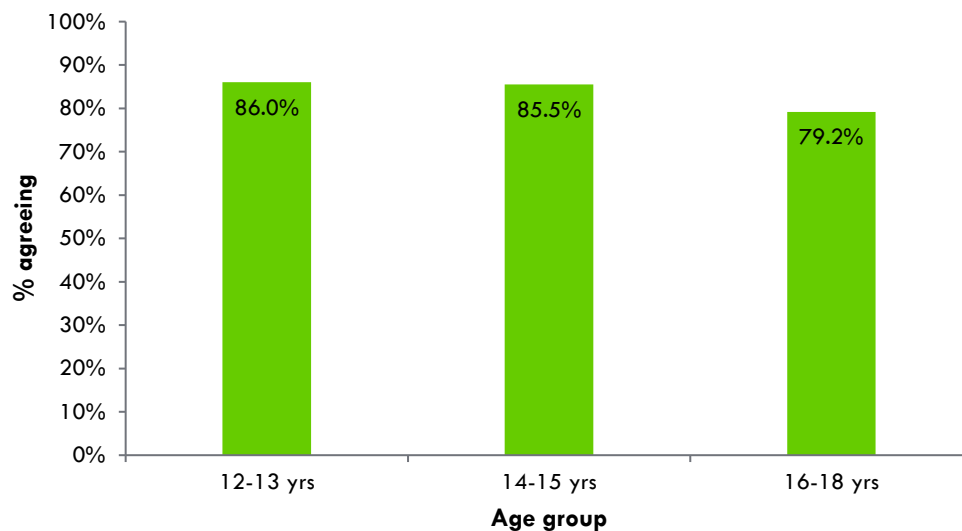


³² $\chi^2(2, N = 929) = 6.93, p = .031$

³³ $\chi^2(2, N = 948) = 6.96, p = .031$

³⁴ All $p > .05$

Importance of positive change after reporting electronic bullying



Barriers to Intervening in Electronic Bullying

Youth were asked whether or not they agreed with a group of statements about barriers to intervening. Those who had been electronically bullied at least once in the previous four weeks were more likely than non-bullied youth to believe that there would be negative consequences for intervening in electronic bullying. Youth who had been electronically bullied were more likely than non-bullied youth to endorse the following reasons for not intervening³⁵:

³⁵ All $p < .05$

I do not intervene when I see mean comments, posts, or pictures because I believe...

- Never been electronically bullied
- Have been electronically bullied at least once

Nothing can be done about it

47% vs. 56%

There will be no follow-up anyway

57% vs. 68%

Talking to friends about it will isolate me

35% vs. 59%

Talking to parents or teachers will not change anything

48% vs. 65%

It is not relevant to me

56% vs. 64%

I will never know if intervening mattered

61% vs. 68%

Adults do not give advice that helps

35% vs. 60%

Adult advice will just increase my isolation

34% vs. 62%

I get power from knowing about it

44% vs. 54%

It is not about me

59% vs. 69%

It will not be taken seriously anyway

50% vs. 70%

My friends might see what I did

50% vs. 64%

I cannot tell if it is drama or bullying

54% vs. 69%

I thought they deserved it

22% vs. 44%

It makes things worse for the target

60% vs. 75%

It might make me a target

70% vs. 82%

6. SEXTING EXPERIENCES

Youth were asked to discuss their experiences with sexting since the COVID-19 pandemic began (March 2020).

- Overall, 56% of youth reported consensually sending sexts to a partner at least once since COVID-19 started. This behaviour increased significantly with age, with 62% of 16-18-year-olds reporting consensually sexting a partner compared to 36% of 12-13-year-olds³⁶. There were also age differences within gender. 16-18-year-old girls were more likely than younger girls to consensually send sexts to a partner³⁷, while 14-15-year-old boys were most likely to consensually send sexts to a partner compared to boys in other age groups³⁸. There were no significant gender differences overall, or within each age group³⁹.

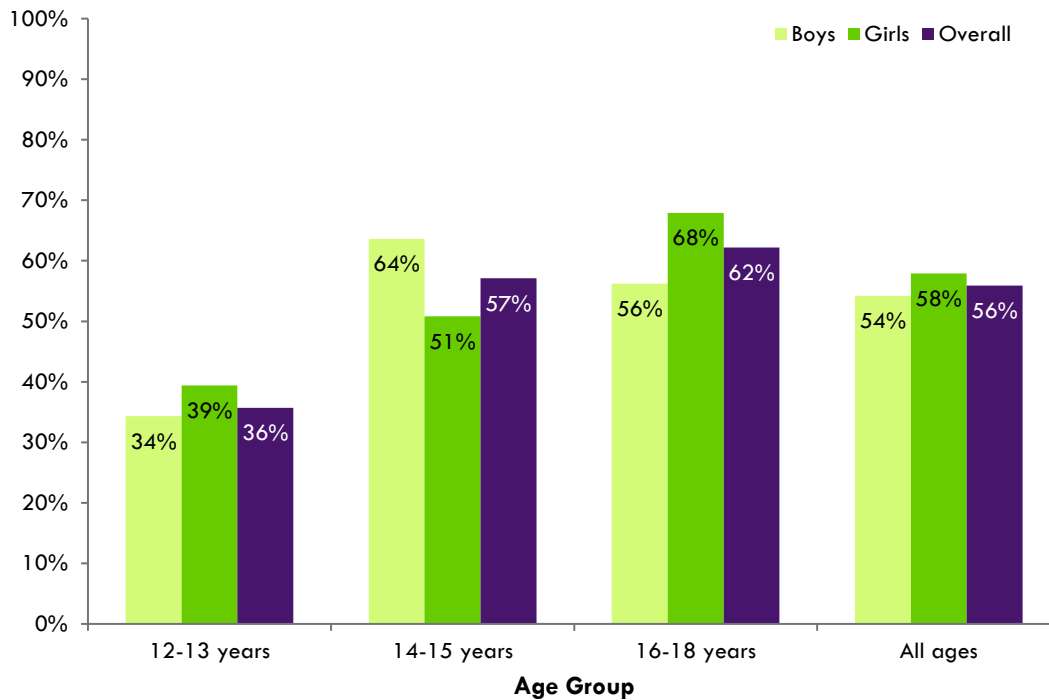
³⁶ $\chi^2(2, N = 390) = 14.87, p = .001$

³⁷ $\chi^2(2, N = 202) = 7.71, p = .021$

³⁸ $\chi^2(2, N = 179) = 10.31, p = .006$

³⁹ All $p > .05$

Percent of youth who have consensually sent sexts to a partner since COVID-19 started



- 42% of youth said that they had received consensual sexts from a partner at least once since COVID-19 started. 12-13-year-olds were significantly less likely to receive consensual sexts from a partner compared to their older counterparts⁴⁰. There were age differences within gender as well: 16-18-year-old girls were significantly more likely than their younger counterparts to receive consensual sexts from a partner⁴¹, and 14-15-year-old boys were significantly more likely to receive consensual sexts from a partner compared to other age groups⁴². There were no significant gender differences overall, or within each age group⁴³.

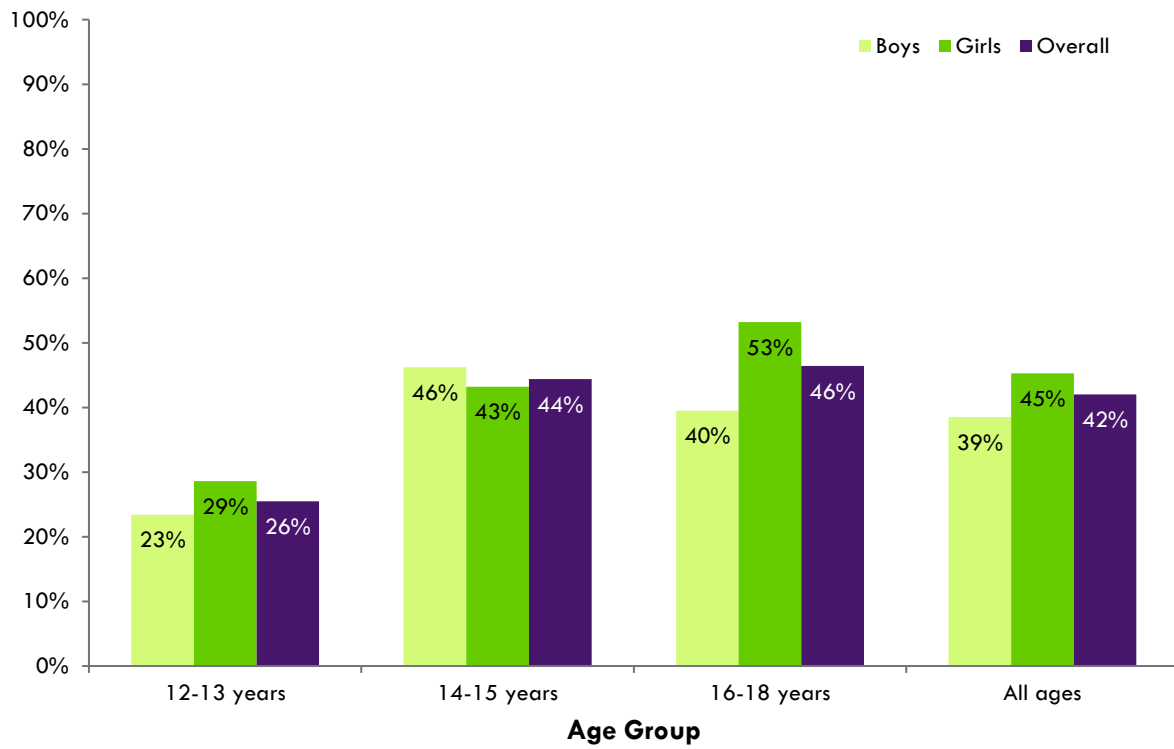
⁴⁰ $\chi^2(2, N = 449) = 13.01, p = .001$

⁴¹ $\chi^2(2, N = 237) = 8.33, p = .015$

⁴² $\chi^2(2, N = 204) = 7.27, p = .026$

⁴³ All $p > .05$

Percent of youth who have received consensual sexts from a partner since COVID-19 started



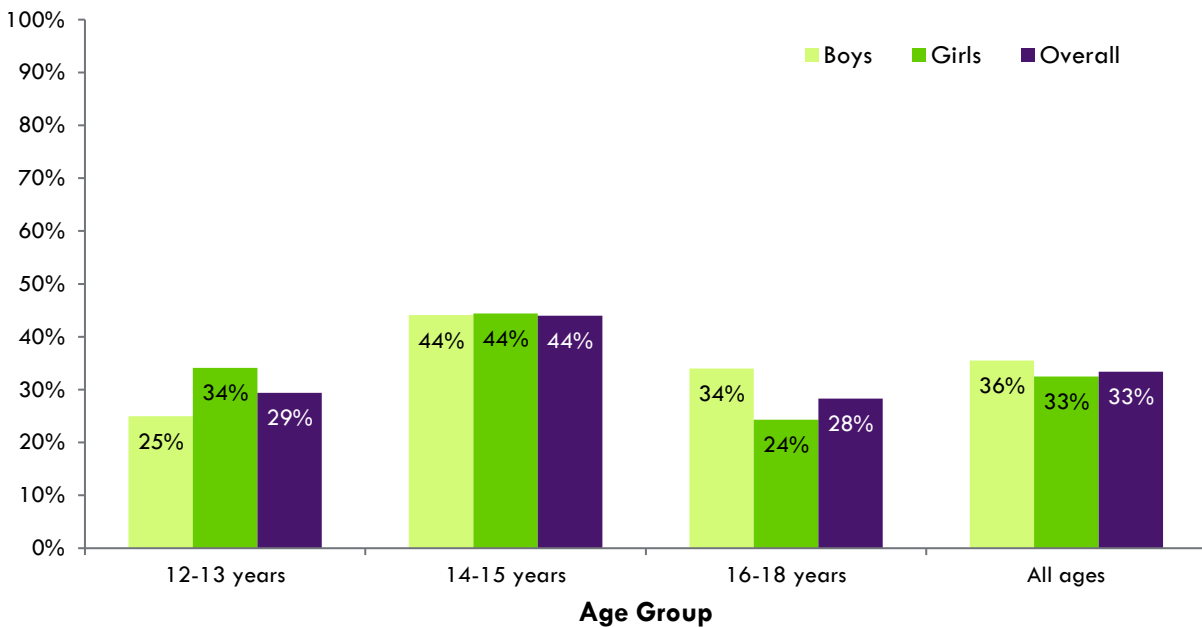
- 33% of youth reported that they had sent non-consensual unwanted sexts to a partner at least once since COVID-19 started. 14-15-year-olds were significantly more likely than their younger and older counterparts to send non-consensual or unwanted sexts to a partner⁴⁴. 14-15-year-old girls were also significantly more likely than older and younger girls to send unwanted sexts to a partner⁴⁵. There were no significant age differences within boys, and no overall gender differences or gender differences within age groups were found⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ $\chi^2(2, N = 449) = 10.35, p = .006$

⁴⁵ $\chi^2(2, N = 231) = 8.22, p = .016$

⁴⁶ All $p > .05$

Percent of youth who have sent unwanted sexts to a partner since COVID-19 started, by age and gender



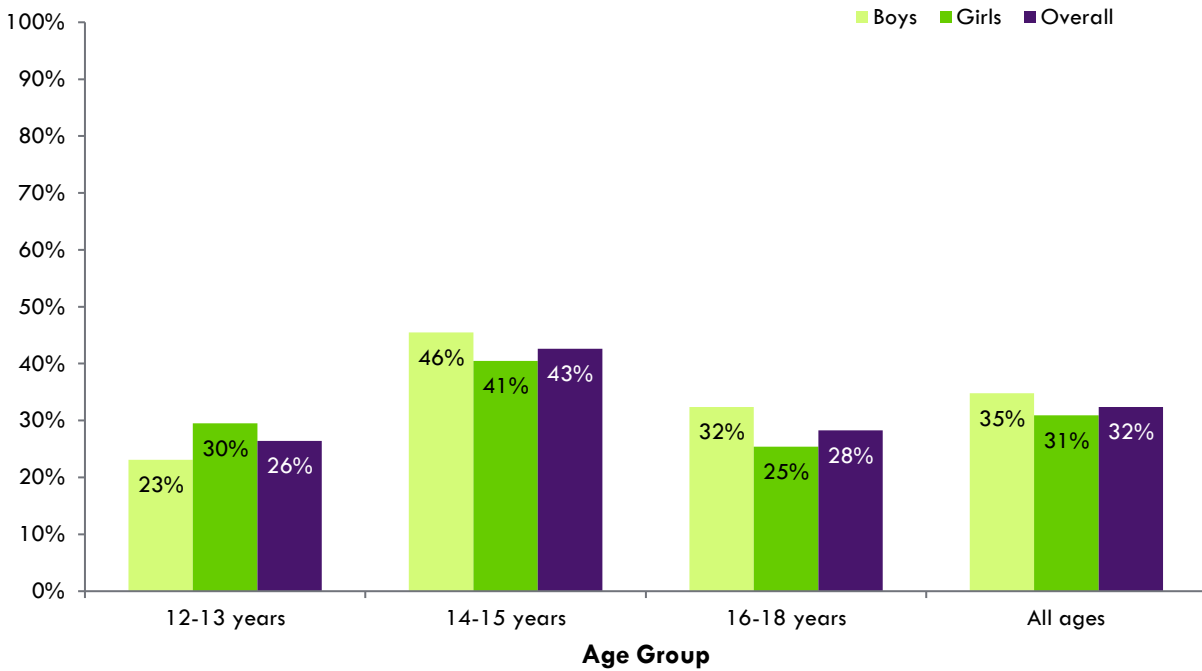
- 32% of youth reported that they had received non-consensual or unwanted sexts from a partner at least once since COVID-19 started. 14-15-year-olds were significantly more likely to receive non-consensual sexts from a partner when compared to other age groups⁴⁷. There were no significant age differences within gender groups⁴⁸. No significant gender differences were found overall or within each age group⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ $\chi^2(2, N = 451) = 9.84, p = .007$

⁴⁸ All $p > .05$

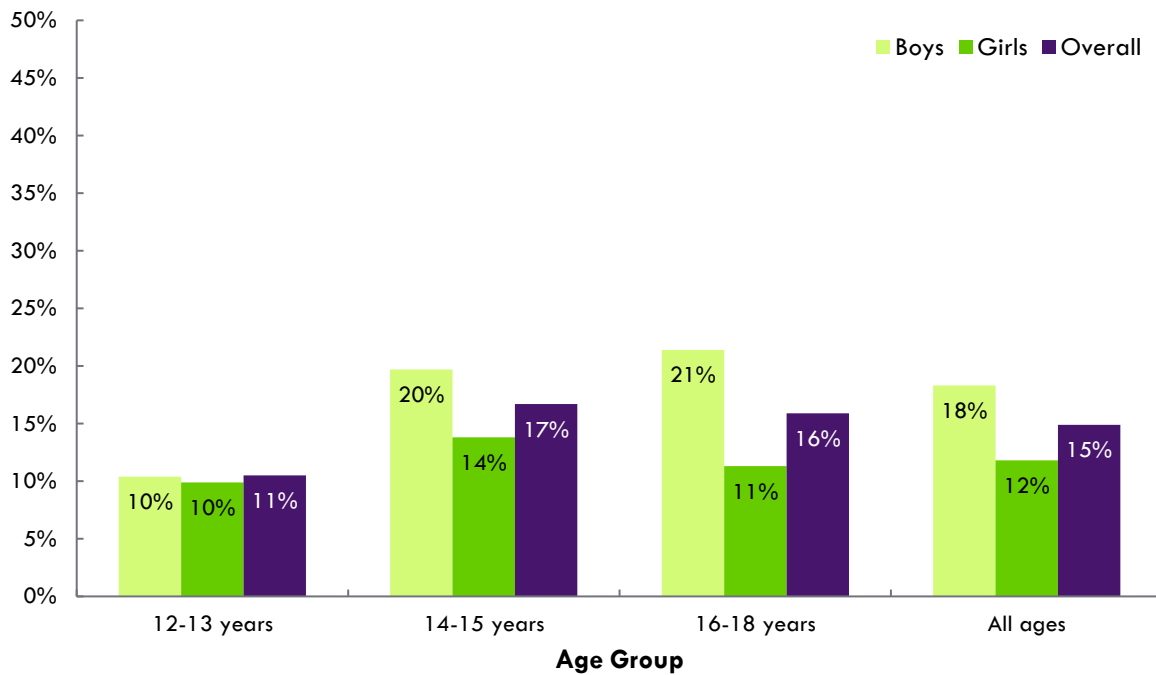
⁴⁹ All $p > .05$

Percent of youth who received unwanted sexts from a partner since COVID-19 started, by age and gender



- 15% of youth reported that they had forwarded a sexual image and/or video of another individual without the permission of the original sender since COVID-19 started. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to forward sexts without the consent of the original sender⁵⁰. There were no significant age differences overall, or within gender groups⁵¹.

Percent of youth who have forwarded a sexual image and/or video of another individual without the permission of the original sender since COVID-19 started, by age and gender



⁵⁰ $\chi^2(1, N = 921) = 7.65, p = .006$

⁵¹ All $p > .05$

KEY MESSAGES AND IMPLICATIONS

The goal of this research was to understand youths' social media use in COVID. Youth were surveyed between December 2020 and February 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. While there were differences across provinces with respect to the restrictions in place, it is an important context for this report. Restrictions designed to curb the spread of COVID-19 frequently required adolescents to spend more time at home, which for most, means more time with their families and significantly less time with their peers. Thus, the role and their use of technology may have changed during COVID-19. In fact, this report indicates that youth were using technology positively to socialize and connect with others, play games, for entertainment, and engage in online learning. About half the youth report that they can share more intimate details about their lives online than in face-to-face. Despite increased time online for socializing and going to school, the good news is that there was no increase in cyberbullying. There was however, a significant number of youth reporting problematic media use. Compared to a recent national study conducted in 2018, the rates of problematic social media use are approximately four times higher (Craig, Pickett, King, 2020). In addition, there was a high prevalence of sexting, likely reflecting how youth were connecting with partners when they could not see them in person due to the COVID restriction. While the Internet is a place for positive interactions and connections, particularly during COVID-19, there were also some risky and concerning behaviours likely due to the centrality of social media in young people's lives.

Implications

- Social media use is a part of youths' daily activities. On the one hand, social media allows youth to create online identities, communicate with others, and build social networks. These connections can provide youth with valuable support, particularly in COVID-19. Youth also use social media for entertainment; self expression; to become informed on current events; and to learn. Social media use can also negatively impact youth by negatively affecting their sleep; exposing them to electronic bullying; creating unrealistic views of others and themselves. Systemic reviews on the relationship between hours spent online and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety have found that there is limited association. There is a positive association between mental health and problematic use (the psychological or behavioural dependence on social media).
- Adults need education on how to support youth by: setting reasonable limits and minimizing online risks; knowing and identifying the signs of problematic social media use; being a positive role model with respect to social media use; creating relationships where youth will talk about what they are doing online; supporting the development of media literacy skills; help them build face-to-face connections and relationships; and supporting the development of autonomy online.

Electronic bullying remains a serious and significant problem. The percentage of youth who report being bullied online is relatively stable in the last five years, while the percentage of youth who report bullying others online has increased. Furthermore, some groups are more at risk for being involved in electronic bullying – younger youth and youth from a racial or ethnic minority. Given the long term negative physical, mental, and academic problems associated with involvement in electronic bullying, the results are concerning.

Implications

- The stability of electronic bullying over time indicates we are currently not doing enough to address it and to support youth online. More resources and programs are required for children, youth, parents/caregivers, and educators. Currently, methods of preventing or intervening in electronic bullying are accomplished through informal conversations; school curriculum; presentations; and bullying prevention programs in general. There are not evidence-based programs designed to specifically address electronic bullying. More work is needed to design prevention and intervention programs or additional modules to current offline bullying programs that will more systemically address electronic bullying. These programs need to take a Whole School Approach involving classmates, teachers, administrators, parents/caregivers, and community support such as the police. Furthermore, policies to address electronic bullying are also needed, as they are inconsistent from school board to school board and from province to province.

A barrier to addressing electronic bullying is often parents and educators do not know about it. Research consistently shows that youth are reluctant to report involvement in electronic bullying to their parents and their teachers. Parents also indicate that they do not have the knowledge or the time to keep up with their youth's online behaviours. They believe it should be a topic covered in school. Educators typically address electronic bullying through programs or school wide assemblies; or curriculum, but also report that they don't know how or when to intervene and also feel like they are mostly not aware of it. When parents or educators do find out about involvement in electronic bullying, often it is when the problem and its impact is quite severe. Parents and educators need more support and education about how to prevent electronic bullying from occurring; strategies to support their child and their child's safety online; how to recognize the signs of involvement in electronic bullying; and what strategies are effective in addressing it; and when and how to seek help.

- Youth are, however, more likely to report to their peers and seek support from them. Thus, programs need to provide youth with safe ways to support and intervene in electronic bullying. Programs need to continue to develop in youth relationships skills (on and off line); digital literacy skills; and social emotional learning skills.

- Sexting was a prevalent behaviour- both sending and receiving, consensual and non-consensual sexts. With age, there was an increase in sending and receiving sexts. During the pandemic, many youth are at home with their parents and unable to have regular contact with their partners. This inability to meet face-to-face with their partners may have contributed to the high prevalence of sexting. Some researchers argue that consensual sexting is normal and a part of healthy adolescent sexual development. According to this perspective, sexting is a more private means for sexual exploration; a way to flirt or show affection; a means to initiate reciprocity; a way to demonstrate trust and sustain intimacy in long term relationships; and a way to joke around and have fun. There is also risk associated with consensual sexting- that the information is shared with others. On the other hand, non-consensual sexting is problematic and distinct from consensual sexting. In this case, there is not consent to share intimate and personal information and as a consequence there may be legal repercussions- such as charges for sharing pornographic material. Although limited, there is also research that demonstrates that male adolescents face little to no stigmatization when sexting and in some cases are even rewarded (with increased popularity because it is seen as a display of heterosexual masculinity and sexual prowess. In contrast, females are more likely to have their sexts used against them. That is, even in the case of non-consensual sharing of texts, female victims are blamed and labelled as being promiscuous. Thus, sexting is complex and requires more research and greater understanding. On the one hand it may represent healthy sexual interaction, on the other hand there are significant risks associated with it including non-consensual sharing.

Implications

- Sexting may be more normative due to the pandemic and the inability to meet face-to-face. Some researchers have argued that consensual sexting is a normal expression of sexuality through technology. It represents a private means to explore relationships (which may be especially important during the pandemic when contact is not recommended). Sexting may provide opportunities to develop competencies in forming, managing, and maintaining relationships and can be a healthy way to discuss sexual health and needs. Nonetheless, there are concerns- it could be a behaviour that starts healthy and then can turn into a problem. Youth need core education and support around sexting and tools to unpack the meaning, and potential implications.
- In contrast, non-consensual sexting is not healthy and can represent problematic of unhealthy relationships. It is a form of violence and abuse.
- Interventions to sexting may require a sex education approach- that is recognizing that sexting in a consensual manner in itself may not be problematic. But even if it is consensual, sexting could violate pornography laws as it is information being put into the public sphere. Non-consensual sexting is harmful. Thus, educating about consent is critical as well as about the consequences of sexting.

2020 Young Canadians' Experiences with Electronic Bullying and Sexting

- It is critical to help youth and schools define sexting, and provide education on privacy and sharing issues, and the potential legal consequences.
- We need prevention programs that start early – in preadolescence and provide youth with increased awareness about the online context and address their false sense of privacy and disinhibition and aggression. This education should also focus on future consequences, problem solving, interpersonal sensitivity, and empathy.
- Currently, there are few programs that address sexting and this topic could be addressed in programs that address healthy relationships.