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Lesson plan: There's no excuse: confronting moral disengagement in sexting

Created in partnership
with MediaSmarts.



Grades: 11-12

Duration: 1 hour, plus time for assessment and evaluation activity.

Overview

In this lesson, students learn about the “sneaky excuses” that can convince us to do things that we know are wrong. After learning about the different types of these excuses, students watch and discuss a series of videos in which the excuses are used to justify forwarding sexts without the original sender’s consent. Finally, students create their own videos in which the excuses used to justify sharing sexts with other people are illustrated and most importantly, countered.

Learning outcomes

Students will:

- Learn to recognize and counter moral disengagement mechanisms.
- Discuss the role of moral disengagement in sext sharing.
- Create a media text.

Preparation and materials

Prepare to project the four **There's No Excuse** videos.

Photocopy the handout and activity sheet: Sneaky Excuses (one for each student).

Photocopy the following assignment sheets (enough copies of each for one-quarter of the class):

- There's no excuse: **Denying the harm**.
- There's no excuse: **Justifying the harm**.
- There's no excuse: **Shifting responsibility**.
- There's no excuse: **Blaming the victim**.

Procedure

Start by asking students to take out a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Tell them that you're going to read some statements, and they need to write down how strongly they agree or disagree with each one – from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). You can also tell students that they won't have to share their answers with anyone.

Read each excuse aloud:

- It's okay to take something that belongs to someone else without asking so long as you return it before they notice.
- If you leave your door unlocked, you can't complain about somebody breaking in.
- Kids shouldn't be blamed for using bad words if they hear their parents do it.
- It's all right to lie to keep your friends out of trouble.
- It's okay to sneak into a movie because it doesn't cost the theatre anything.
If you weren't there, they'd just have an empty seat.
- Kids shouldn't be blamed for doing something their parents told them to do.
- Most people who get bullied bring it on themselves by being different.
- It's okay to cheat on your schoolwork if your teacher didn't give you enough time to do it properly.

Explain to students that each of these are examples of sneaky excuses that we use to tell ourselves that it's okay to do something we know is wrong (or to not do something that we know is right.) We also use these excuses when we want a reason not to blame somebody for something they did (because they're a friend or a family member, because we've done similar things or can imagine ourselves doing them, et cetera.)

Distribute the handout **Sneaky Excuses**. Read through the definitions and examples of the four types of excuses (Denying the Harm, Justifying the Harm, Shifting Responsibility and Blaming the Victim) and then ask students to sort the statements you just read into those categories:

Denying the harm.

- It's okay to take something that belongs to someone else so long as you return it before they notice.
- It's okay to sneak into a movie because it doesn't cost the theatre anything.
If you weren't there, they'd just have an empty seat.

Justifying the harm.

- It's all right to lie to keep your friends out of trouble.
- It's okay to cheat on your schoolwork if your teacher didn't give you enough time to do it properly.

Shifting the responsibility.

- Kids shouldn't be blamed for using bad words if they hear their parents do it.
- Kids shouldn't be blamed for doing something their parents told them to do.

Blaming the victim.

- If you leave your door unlocked, you can't complain about somebody breaking in.
- Most people who get bullied bring it on themselves by being different.

Point out to students that it's very easy to let ourselves be convinced by sneaky excuses: all of us probably agreed at least somewhat with some of those statements. Explain that the best way to keep ourselves from falling for sneaky excuses is to learn to recognize them, so we can make a habit of countering them.

Now, tell students you're going to look at another example of how easy it is to fall for sneaky excuses and show the first **There's no excuse video, "Everybody does it."**

Have students identify which type of sneaky excuse is being shown in the video and how it's expressed (when the boy says "Everyone shares nudes").

Ask students how that excuse minimizes the harm done by sharing sexts. (First, it's not true – less than a quarter of 16 to 17 year-olds have shared one – and more importantly, just because "everyone does" something doesn't make it less harmful.)

Now show the video **"I'm just the messenger"** and have them identify the sneaky excuse and how it's expressed (when Terrin says, "I'm just the messenger").

Ask students how they might counter that excuse (for example, they could point out that even if they're not the first person to share a sext, everyone who shares one is doing additional harm to the original sender).

Next, show the video **"You should be thanking me"**, and have students identify the sneaky excuse and how it's expressed (when the boy says, "I was just showing people what can happen when you share raunchy pics").

Explain to students that there are times when we may have to choose a "lesser of two evils," but we always have to make sure that we're doing as little harm as possible for the most good. For example, a doctor does harm to the patient when they do surgery, but they only do it when necessary and try to do as little harm as possible.

Because of that, we always have to ask whether we really have to do harm, or whether we're just looking for an excuse to do something we know is wrong.

Finally, show the video "**It's your fault for sending it in the first place**" and have students identify the sneaky excuse and how it's expressed (when Sasha says, "it's your fault for sending it to me in the first place").

Tell students that it is often the sender of the sext who is blamed instead of the person who shared it without permission. Does that match their experience?

Point out that sending a sext in Canada is not illegal, but sharing one of someone else without consent is, and that while sending a sext might be seen as unwise it's definitely less wrong than sharing one. Sending a sext usually isn't done with the intent to harm and generally doesn't hurt anyone except possibly the sender themselves (or if the recipient is underage and/or they've explicitly asked to not be sent such content). On the other hand, sharing a sharing a sext of someone else without their consent is likely to hurt the subject and is done either with intent to harm or disregard for whether or not the subject is harmed.

Assignment.

Now, divide students into eight groups and distribute the assignment, **There's no excuse**. Assign one type of excuse to two groups and repeat until all eight groups are assigned a type of excuse. The groups should not know which excuses were assigned to the other groups.

Have each group prepare a two-part video:

- In the first part, they perform a skit about sexting where someone expresses the excuse they were assigned. (It should not be expressed the same way as in the videos they watched).
- In the second part, students present a counter-argument to the excuse. (If it is not practical to have students create a video, have them prepare live skits instead).

Once students have finished preparing, have one group present the first part of their video to the class, then have the rest of the class try to identify which type of excuse it was an example of and suggest counter-arguments. Next, have the group show the second part of their video and compare their counter-argument to the ones the class brainstormed.

Repeat this with the rest of the groups.



Handout and activity sheet: **Sneaky excuses.**

Sneaky excuses are the ways that we tell ourselves that it's okay to do something that we know is wrong (or to not do something that we know is right). They're called sneaky excuses because a lot of the time, we don't even realize we're making an excuse!

That's why it's important to learn to recognize them so that we can tell whether we're doing something because we really have a good reason, or just because we're making an excuse.

Here are the four most common kinds of sneaky excuses:

Denying the harm.

One of the easiest excuses to fall for is denying that something did harm to anyone, or minimizing how much harm was done. Sometimes we do this by comparing it to something that's worse, so that the thing we did looks better by comparison.

Examples:

- Shoplifting isn't a big deal compared to serious crimes like robbery or murder.
- Being bullied is just a part of growing up. It doesn't really hurt anyone.

Justifying the harm.

Another common excuse is to say that you had to do something bad, or that it was okay to do it because it did more good than bad.

It's true that sometimes doing things that are wrong will do more good than harm. For example, during the Civil Rights movement people broke racist laws as a way of showing people that those laws were unfair. But it's important to make sure that you're really doing something for a good cause, and not looking for excuses to justify doing something you know is wrong.

Examples:

- Getting bullied teaches kids to be tough.
- If somebody in your family breaks the law, you should lie to protect them because family is more important than anything else.

Shifting the responsibility.

If we can't find a way to convince ourselves that something isn't really wrong, we may use an excuse to say it isn't our fault. This can mean either shifting the blame to a specific person, or just finding a reason why we aren't to blame.

- If you tell someone to do something bad, it's not your fault if they go ahead and do it.
- You shouldn't blame someone for something they did while they were drunk, because they couldn't control themselves.

Blaming the victim.

Sometimes we don't just shift responsibility away from ourselves, we actually blame the person who was hurt by what we did. It's easy to be fooled by this excuse because you can pretend that you didn't do anything wrong at all.

- If you act weird or dress in a funny way, you can't complain if people tease you.
- If somebody bullies other people, they deserve to be bullied back.

Categorize the excuses below into the correct category of sneaky excuses. Place a check mark in the appropriate column below:

Excuse	Denying the harm	Justifying the harm	Shifting the responsibility	Blaming the victim
It's okay to take something that belongs to someone else so long as you return it before they notice.				
If you leave your door unlocked, you can't complain about somebody breaking in.				
Kids shouldn't be blamed for using bad words if they hear their parents do it.				
It's all right to lie to keep your friends out of trouble.				
It's okay to sneak into a movie because it doesn't cost the theatre anything. If you weren't there, they'd just have an empty seat.				
Soldiers shouldn't be blamed for anything they do in war, so long as they were following orders.				
Criminals shouldn't be able to complain if they get hurt while being arrested. It's their own fault for breaking the law.				
It's okay to torture someone if it's the only way to get information that will save lives.				

There's no excuse assignment: **Denying the harm.**

For this assignment, your group will be assigned one of the four sneaky excuses.

You will make a video that dramatizes how people use this excuse to justify sharing sexts without the sender's consent (or to make excuses for someone who did it).

You may choose to make this video as a filmed skit, as animation, or in any other video format of your choice that allows you to meet the requirements of the assignment.

Your video will have two parts:

- In the first part, you will perform a skit about sexting where someone expresses the excuse you were assigned. (It should not be expressed the same way as in the videos you watched).
- In the second part you will present a counter-argument to the excuse.

Denying the harm.

One of the easiest excuses to fall for is denying that something did harm to anyone, or minimizing how much harm was done. Sometimes we do this by comparing it to something that's worse, so that the thing we did looks better by comparison.

Here are some sneaky excuses people use to say it's okay to share sexts without the sender's consent:

- It's not as bad to share a sext if you make sure only a few people see it.
- It's not as bad to share a sext if you're not the first person it was sent to.
- It is not as bad to share a sext if you're not in a relationship with the person who sent it because you're not betraying their trust.
- Sharing a sext someone sent you isn't as bad as sharing one where the person didn't know that the photo had been taken.

There's no excuse assignment: **Justifying the harm.**

For this assignment, your group will be assigned one of the four sneaky excuses.

You will make a video that dramatizes how people use this excuse to justify sharing sexts without the sender's consent (or to make excuses for someone who did it.)

You may choose to make this video as a filmed skit, as animation, or in any other video format of your choice that allows you to meet the requirements of the assignment.

Your video will have two parts:

- In the first part, you will perform a skit about sexting where someone expresses the excuse you were assigned. (It should not be expressed the same way as in the videos you watched).
- In the second part you will present a counter-argument to the excuse.

Justifying the harm.

One common excuse is to say that you had to do something bad, or that it was okay to do it because it did more good than bad.

It's true that sometimes doing things that are wrong will do more good than harm. For example, during the Civil Rights movement people broke racist laws as a way of showing people that those laws were unfair. But it's important to make sure that you're really doing something for a good cause, and not looking for excuses to justify doing something you know is wrong.

Here are some sneaky excuses people use to say it's okay to share sexts without the sender's consent:

- It's more important to make sure people don't send sexts than to punish people who share them.
- When someone's sexts get shared around, it shows others the risks of sending sexts.
- If someone cheats on you, they can't complain if you share sexts they sent you.
- It's not wrong to share a sext if the person who sent it has done the same thing to other people.

There's no excuse assignment: **Shifting the responsibility.**

For this assignment, your group will be assigned one of the four sneaky excuses.

You will make a video that dramatizes how people use this excuse to justify sharing sexts without the sender's consent (or to make excuses for someone who did it.)

You may choose to make this video as a filmed skit, as animation, or in any other video format of your choice that allows you to meet the requirements of the assignment.

Your video will have two parts:

- In the first part, you will perform a skit about sexting where someone expresses the excuse you were assigned. (It should not be expressed the same way as in the videos you watched).
- In the second part you will present a counter-argument to the excuse.

Shifting the responsibility.

If we can't find a way to convince ourselves that something is okay, we may use an excuse to say it isn't our fault. This can mean either shifting the blame to a specific person, or just finding a reason why we aren't to blame.

Here are some sneaky excuses people use to say it's okay to share sexts without the sender's consent:

- If someone shares another person's sext with just one friend, and that friend shares it with others, it's not really the first sharer's fault.
- It's sad when a sext gets shared around, but after it happens there's nothing you can do to help.
- There's nothing wrong with sharing a sext if other people have already shared it.
- You can't blame a boy for sharing a sext his girlfriend sent him. That's just the way boys are.

There's no excuse assignment: **Blaming the victim.**

For this assignment, your group will be assigned one of the four sneaky excuses.

You will make a video that dramatizes how people use this excuse to justify sharing sexts without the sender's consent (or to make excuses for someone who did it).

You may choose to make this video as a filmed skit, as animation, or in any other video format of your choice that allows you to meet the requirements of the assignment.

Your video will have two parts:

- In the first part, you will perform a skit about sexting where someone expresses the excuse you were assigned. (It should not be expressed the same way as in the videos you watched).
- In the second part you will present a counter-argument to the excuse.

Blaming the victim.

Sometimes we don't just shift responsibility away from ourselves, we actually blame the person who was hurt by what we did. It's easy to be fooled by this excuse because you can pretend that you didn't do anything wrong at all.

Here are some sneaky excuses people use to say it's okay to share sexts without the sender's consent:

- If a girl/boy sends a sext to someone they aren't in a relationship with, he/she shouldn't be surprised if it gets shared around.
- If you cheat on someone, you shouldn't be surprised if they share sexts you sent them.
- It's not as bad to share a sext if the person in it has had sexts of shared before.
- What did he/she think was going to happen if he/she sent a sext?

There's No Excuse Assignment: Rubric

	Confident (4)	Competent (3)	Developing (2)	Beginning (1)	Insufficient (0)
Use					
Ethics and Empathy Considers the ethical implications of using digital technology	Student is able to demonstrate how youth can counter moral disengagement (sneaky excuses) in a sexting context	Student is able to demonstrate how moral disengagement (sneaky excuses) can influence decision-making in a sexting context	Student is able to communicate how youth might make bad decisions in a sexting context	With help, student is able to communicate how youth might make bad decisions in a sexting context	Even with help, no success
Community Engagement Advocates safe, ethical and responsible use of digital technology					
Digital Health Makes good choices about personal relationships and digital technology					
Understand					
Ethics and Empathy Shows an understanding of the ethical implications of using digital technology Understands the ways in which digital technology may hamper empathy and foster moral disengagement	Student contributes original insights regarding how moral disengagement attitudes (sneaky excuses) can lead to bad decisions in a sexting context	Student understands how moral disengagement attitudes (sneaky excuses) can lead to bad decisions in a sexting context	Student understands how youth can make bad decisions in a sexting context	With help, student understands how youth can make bad decisions in a sexting context	Even with help, no success
Digital Health Thinks critically about the risks and responsibilities of online relationships					
Create					
Ethics and Empathy Creates an original work expressing their understanding of digital technology and moral disengagement	Student is able to communicate their understanding in an original and insightful scenario	Student is able to communicate their understanding in an original scenario	Student is able to communicate their understanding in a scenario that draws on one of the example videos	With help, student is able to communicate their understanding in a scenario that draws on one of the example videos	Even with help, no success
Digital Health Demonstrates an awareness of the pressures that youth face when sending and receiving photos online					