



Association of Professionals  
Solving the Abuse of Children  
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# Practice Guidelines 2025

## Opposing Showing CSAM and Sexted Images to Parents, Guardians, and Other Adults

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## **APSAC Practice Guidelines**

### **Opposing Showing CSAM and Sexted Images to Parents, Guardians, and Other Adults**

As the leading organization of professionals who serve children and families affected by child maltreatment, the Association of Professionals Solving the Abuse of Children (APSAC) has the responsibility and expertise to advocate for policies and practices that protect children, youths, and families. APSAC joins other organizations in the battle against a child sexual abuse epidemic enabled by the Internet: the production and distribution of online child sexual abuse material (CSAM). In 2024, 29.2 million separate incidents of child sexual exploitation were submitted to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Cyber Tip Line (NCMEC, 2025)

A 2013 APSAC position statement describes how CSAM harms children (APSAC, 2013). In addition to the substantial harm created by the child sexual abuse used to make CSAM, victims suffer further from the sense of vulnerability from having their abuse filmed, the shame and embarrassment of having this material available to the world, and the fear of being identified. In many cases, child victims suffer the horror that their CSAM video or photographs could be used to manipulate and harm other children, could lead to further adult sexual gratification, and may endure forever on the Internet.

However, there are many cases where youths willingly create and share sexual images of themselves with peers or others, usually by online, digital means. There is great risk that their images could be used in ways that harm them, including "sextortion"—others using the threat of disseminating the images to gain money and/or control over the youth, or further dissemination by recipients and others to pornographic websites. Further, this consensual image production could still meet certain legal definitions for the criminal possession or distribution of child pornography, and is especially concerning if adults receive these images and redistribute them.

When school authorities and others respond to sexual images of youths being disseminated, these adults sometimes show the images of the child or youth to parents, guardians, or other adults. This is very likely to exacerbate the harm to children and youths, and may damage any criminal prosecution. The language in the "sexted" messages accompanying the sexual images, if read to or by others, may also damage the youth's relationships, particularly with parents.

Further, adults not involved in an official law enforcement investigation risk criminal

prosecution for any possession or dissemination of certain sexted images. Therefore, third-party school officials or others who encounter sexual images of children and youth regardless of how they were produced or who disseminated them, are required by criminal law to immediately report and turn over all images and information to law enforcement. They must never disseminate them to anyone else. APSAC therefore opposes showing sexted images of youths to parents, guardians, or others in these circumstances.

A separate, concerning practice is that of law enforcement officials showing parents or guardians unedited, evidentiary CSAM images of their child during their investigation.<sup>1</sup> The emotional risk to the children or youths involved is substantial. Many children and youths are likely to find out that their parents saw the images, either because parents tell them, or because the youths find out in other ways.

This may well be considered a betrayal of trust and traumatize victims. The youth now know, from their parents, that their family, their friends, and the world may have access to these images, forever. Children are also likely to experience further shame and embarrassment from knowing that their parents have seen the images. Parents seeing the images may question their child about why they did not avoid or escape from the abuse; in effect, blaming the victim. No one can possibly predict the future emotional impact on the youth of the disclosure that such pictures exist, and that their parents viewed them.

Parents themselves may experience trauma from seeing pictures of their child, likely naked, engaged in a sex act with another minor, a sibling, or an adult they do or do not know. Parents could experience similar trauma from reading the texted language that often accompanies sexual images, or having it read to them. Enraged parents may even attempt reprisal.

The law enforcement practice of showing unedited CSAM images to youths' parent or guardian is entirely contrary to APSAC's 2013 critical position statement on the emotional distress suffered by children involved in the production of CSAM. The first, bedrock rule in the investigation of child sexual abuse is to maintain, or enhance, a child victim's emotional and

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<sup>1</sup> Professionals occasionally display CSAM images to the victimized children during interviews. This poses substantial risks as well, but the issues surrounding this action are somewhat different and there is not yet professional consensus about this practice. The discussion of exposing victimized children to the digital CSAM images (evidence) of their own victimization is beyond the scope of this position statement, but deserves future policy development.

physical safety. APSAC's Code of Ethics (APSAC, 1997, pp. 1-2) states, "...members recognize their special responsibility to children, whose inherent vulnerability and powerlessness, combined with the betrayal, trauma, and developmental threat of abuse, make relationships between the child and professionals all the more critical."

In consideration of the above, it is the position of APSAC that:

1. Parents and guardians must never be shown CSAM images. If absolutely necessary for law enforcement's investigative purposes, a parent must only be shown digitally edited, non-sexual versions of images. The edited version of CSAM images must only display a suspect's face or an identifiable body feature, preferably neutral face (only) of an unidentified child, or the background environment of an image.

When absolutely necessary, the non-sexual edited images should only be used for the investigative purposes of identification of an unidentified victim or offender, or establishing the location and jurisdiction over the crime scene. Investigators (from federal, state, or local law enforcement, or child protective services) must also exercise great care to avoid quoting from text messages containing explicit language written by a youth or an adult offender, as this, too, may trigger adverse reaction from parents. Investigators must use empathy, concerns for family privacy, and trauma-informed language in paraphrasing such messages during interviews of parents.

2. Sexual images of a child or youth that they created and/or distributed themselves must never be further distributed to any other person, other than in the immediate reporting to law enforcement officials, as required by law.
3. Law enforcement agencies and prosecutors should have protocols in place to restrict and limit access to such images only to those who need to view such images for criminal justice purposes.

## References

American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (1997). Code of ethics.

[https://www.apsac.org/\\_files/ugd/4700a8\\_6a46ba45db5a4794b06497c98d9c4281.pdf](https://www.apsac.org/_files/ugd/4700a8_6a46ba45db5a4794b06497c98d9c4281.pdf)

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