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Do you speak Net? Web site answers parents' SOS
NetLingo.com is helping moms and dads crack the code of kids' cyberslang.

Camilla A. Herrera the Stamford Advocate | December 25, 2006

Admit it.

No matter how hard a parent tries to understand a child, it sometimes seems as if the kids are communicating in a different language.

Truth is, they are, says Erin Jansen, an Internet specialist and founder of NetLingo.com, an online dictionary of "cyberspeak" that has sprung up since the development of the Internet.

"Millenials [today's kids] are the ones coming up with the acronyms, and I think this is empowering for them," she says.

Adolescents use a constantly evolving jargon of acronyms, abbreviations and shorthand while chatting online in public and private chat rooms and on social networking sites as well as through e-mail and instant messages.

The only difference is kids specifically use the talk to KPC (keep parents clueless).

"I have nothing to hide, but it's a question of privacy," says high-school senior Danielle Lanslots, who lists LOL (laugh out loud), LOLA (laugh out loud again), BRB (be right back) and TTYL (talk to you later) as acronyms she commonly uses with her friends.

"There are definitely some things we are talking about that we don't want [parents] to see. I've used POS [parent over shoulder]," says Lanslots, of Stamford, Conn.

No surprise there. We, too, actively hid what we could from our parents, using pointed slang and signals only friends understood. Our children are following in our footsteps.

But parents should be on guard, Jansen says.

"The danger lies in a different place from what we tried to hide from our parents," she says. "When we were doing this, we weren't on the Internet. [The] Internet has exposed us to all kinds of people all over the world." The potential exposure of personal information and the associated risks that come with such exposure make it more important than before to understand what the kids are saying to their friends, even if they don't want us to.

It's a matter of safety, says Sgt. Joe Kennedy, who heads the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force for the Stamford police youth bureau.

"As parents, we're looking at this new language, and now we need to learn it," he says.

The lists Jansen maintains show countless terms that might intimidate, but how the expressions are formed soon becomes clear.

Unfortunately, many of these meanings can shock, reminding parents of predator dangers and how computer lingo can be used by someone who should not be communicating with children.

Jansen stresses her aim is not to alarm parents, in part because most teens do not use sexual-predatory language with each other.

"These acronyms are from the adults," Jansen says. "They are the ones teaching the kids TDTM [talk dirty to me] or IWSN [I want sex now].

"But adult acronyms are making their way into this teen-speak," she says. "So this really should be about discussing Internet safety with your kids."

Forget about the generation gap, the belief that kids are technologically savvier than parents. There is little choice but to become educated.

"Like anything in parenting, we need to be involved in kids' lives now, because so much revolves around texting, IM-ing, social networking. They want it that way. And you won't be able to see or track, but you can be involved," Jansen says.

"They have to know that they are exposed to the whole world online. It's not just you and your girlfriends. Anyone can see what you post, over and over."

Begin by disallowing a computer in a child's room.

"It should be in the busiest room in the house, where the normal traffic allows you to look over your kid's shoulder," Kennedy says.

Know passwords for all accounts, including those for social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook.

"Set up your own page," Kennedy says. "Make up information, but this way you see how it works."

Other tips include checking search and chat histories and downloading monitoring software.

"They are going to reject that," Jansen warns. "Be up to speed about the thinking and the risks. They should know that it's not only their high-school group reading what they're blogging about."