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In online messaging shorthand, "POS" stand for "Parent Over Shoulder," used to warn others that the correspondence might be seen.

Jay Reiter photo illustration

Parents: Know what your kids are talking about online

By Rachel Forrest
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"I was noticing Scott was spending all this time online and he wasn't playing games anymore," says Marta Salida of her 12-year-old son.

"Whenever I came over to the computer he sort of tried to block the e-mail or whatever he was doing with his hand or he'd close out the window, but I'd see all these letters that didn't mean anything. I had no idea what was going on."

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It turned out that the typical Epping preteen was just talking to his friends online using the language of the Internet while instant messaging, or IMing.

Children may be studying French and Spanish and the rules of English grammar in school, but when they're in computer lab or at home on the family computer they have developed a whole different language - one that parents might not be able to decipher.

POS, for example, stands for Parent Over Shoulder, which warns that their correspondence might be seen.

Through instant messaging, a technology through which Internet users can write to each other in "real time," kids (and adults) can spend hours communicating with numerous people at the same time.

As the communication method evolved over the past 10 years, users learned how to make it easier on themselves, typing in acronyms and shorthand phrases. Now, it's a language of its own.

E-mail and instant messaging can be a wonderful way to communicate, to share ideas, to keep in touch with friends and family and to do business. Some wonder how we functioned without it.

It's instantaneous, there's a record of the communication, it doesn't tie up the family phone if hooked up to cable or broadband, and there are no long distance charges, even to Timbuktu.

But there are dangers, especially for kids. What else is going on? Who are they talking to and what are they saying? How does this affect their ability to communicate? And how can parents monitor the situation?

In a communication revolution with many upsides, there are of course dangers. Kids are "approached" online randomly by lurkers and those who prey on children. They get unsolicited offers for consumer goods, some of them adult pornography Web sites. Kids gang up on each other online - a form of IM bullying. And although communication is instantaneous, it's also conducted behind a protective "shield" of acronym IM identities made up of letters, numbers and symbols, making one feel more free to express oneself in sometimes inappropriate ways. Finally, face-to-face communication might become harder for developing teens who are spending hours in nonvisual interaction.

Craig Baskus is a field engineer for Personal Nerds in Rye, a nationwide company that covers all computer, audio and video set up and networking needs as well as training. He became interested in the language and uses of e-mail and IMing after a stint on the Boston Stock Exchange. He also helps parents learn how to handle this new way to communicate.

"There was concern over what sort of information was being corresponded electronically," says Baskis. "They were looking at how to capture and archive e-mail and IM and make it accessible in order to keep in compliance with the SEC."

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This experience resulted in his senior thesis at Endicott College in Beverly, Mass., in which he examined how IMs affected employees and then an interest in how people use IM in daily life.

"IM is growing at a rate 50 to 60 percent faster than e-mail," says Baskis. "IM is inherently good. It's a tool to communicate, but it breaks down the barrier of what you would say to someone face to face."

Terrance Fironi of Stratham noticed this in himself, and then worried about his son's use of IM.

"I was online using e-mail and IM and when I'm chatting with someone I know or even someone I met through some groups I'm in, I noticed I will speak more freely. I'll flirt, I'll be more quick to send negative mail - it's a weird thing when you aren't actually looking at someone. I worried that my kid, who maybe doesn't have the experience or awareness I have, is making that his primary form of communication. It's dangerous to be so free without sort of editing yourself."

Baskis says he has a client who has kids who are experiencing IM bullying.

"There are things happening on IM at night that is going into the schools. Kids are writing about each other and then carrying it over. One teacher tried to say you can't have IM at home, but you can't really regulate that."

We're also losing the social aspect of face-to-face interaction.

"Parents are asking 'How are my kids going to interact when they grow up?' says Baskis. "Are there going to be IM job interviews?"

And then there are the online predators.

"Parents see these acronyms and they have no idea what they mean," says Baskis. "You never know who your kids is talking to in an IM and then you don't even know what he's saying. There's a 'false barrier' there that brings you into a situation you're not prepared for."

Baskis recommends that kids not put any personal information into online profiles because predators will search them and identify their own sick preferences and contact kids via IM posing as other children. Kids take a step out of reality and are sucked into dangerous situations.

He also recommends that parents place filters on use of IM and chat. America Online (AOL) has parental controls that allow users to limit IMs and e-mails to certain screen names or to eliminate the use of them altogether. Many e-mail services have similar programs.

"You should know everyone your kid is IMing or e-mailing," says Baskis. "And you should know what they are saying. All the abbreviations and punctuation is like a dialect. You need to know the language."

Learn the lingo

[NetLingo.com](http://www.netlingo.com) lists many of the acronyms and shorthand slang used on the Internet. Here are some of the more common abbreviations used:

2NITE - Tonight

A/S/L or ASL - Age/Sex/Location

ADR - Address

AEAP - As Early As Possible

ALAP - As Late As Possible

BRT - Be Right There

CWYL - Chat With You Later

CYT or SYT - See You Tomorrow

EOD - End Of Day

F2F - Face To Face

FOAF - Friend Of A Friend

HAK - Hugs And Kisses

ILU or ILY - I Love You

KFY - Kiss For You

KOTL - Kiss On The Lips

L8R - Later

LD - Long Distance

LMK - Let Me Know

LOL - Laugh Out Loud

MOOS - Member(s) Of the Opposite Sex

MorF - Male or Female

MOSS or MOTSS - Member(s) Of The Same Sex

NALOPKT - Not A Lot Of People Know That

NAZ - Name, Address, Zip

N-A-Y-L - In A While

OLL - Online Love

OTP - On The Phone

POS - Parent Over Shoulder

QT - Cutie

RN - Right Now

RU - Are You ...

SMIM - Send Me and Instant Message

SMEM - Send Me an E-Mail

SO - Significant Other

SorG - Straight or Gay

TDTM - Talk Dirty To Me

TOM - Tomorrow

TTFN - Ta-ta for Now

U-R - You Are ...

WFM - Works For Me

WUF - Where Are You From?

WYCM - Will You Call Me?

WTRN - What's Your Real Name?



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