

Putting 'text' in context

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Photo illustration Wilfred McNeil/Clarion-Ledger

WHAT IT MEANS

- WIBNI - Wouldn't It Be Nice If
- IM - Instant Messaging
- ASAMOF - As A Matter Of Fact
- ESEMED - Every Second Every Minute Every Day
- FITB - Fill In The Blanks

If you've been watching TV lately, chances are you've seen the Cingular/AT&T commercial featuring a young girl talking to her mother in "text lingo" about sending texts to her "bff jill."

Experts say scenes such as this have become a reflection of real life, as teens and young adults are using shorthand and acronyms in everyday conversation.

What began as a way for young people to communicate more efficiently in Internet chat rooms has parents wondering what their kids are saying, said Erin Jansen, founder of NetLingo.com, which is an online dictionary of Internet lingo or "Net lingo," text lingo and emoticons.

Jansen said young people have become so accustomed to the neo-language that they don't even realize they're using it when they speak. This may not come as a surprise to some since between 75 percent and 90 percent of teens use the Internet, according to a study by the American Psychological Association. Also, about 60 percent of teens own a cell phone, according to statistics by national wireless company U.S. Cellular.

Some teens use the codes deliberately when they want to disguise what they're talking about when Mom and Dad are around.

"It's kind of like pig latin, back when I was a kid," Jansen said.

Hilary Childress of Jackson, 14, said though she and her friends sometimes use codes, it's not to fool their parents. "It's just shorter."

" 'I don't know' is 'idk,' " Hilary said. "We use that a lot."

Kimberly Childress, Hilary's mother, said she's familiar with some commonly used lingo, such as "lol" for "laughing out loud," but doesn't have a clue what other abbreviations mean.

To find out, many parents are doing their own research.

"I'm on the Internet a lot. Just from various things I read online, I can decipher most of it," said David King of Jackson, who has two daughters, 14 and 16.

The cell phone and Web jargon has even crept into students' school work, said Ray Vaughn, a computer science and engineering professor and director of the Mississippi State University Center for Computer Security Research.

"When they use it in everyday language, it becomes right and proper in their minds.

"I'll see it in e-mails and formal documents like papers," he said. "It's becoming a pseudo-language."

Vaughn said his 22-year-old daughter can type faster on her cell phone than he can type on his computer. She has become a master of the new language, using it in everyday conversation. Vaughn said he uses the context to decrypt the code.

Many teachers are worried that such shorthand may be a detriment to students, as they gradually forget proper language rules and replace them with Net and text lingo “rules,” Jansen said.

Some parents have other concerns — such as safety. “That’s the main thing,” King said. Understanding his daughters, he said, helps him protect them.

Mostly, though, Vaughn said the lingo is simply annoying.

“I don’t think it’s so much a danger,” he said. “It’s more at the irritant level.”

Jansen said the best way for parents to stay abreast of what their teens are saying is to educate themselves and talk to their kids.

“It’s just like any other family challenge,” she said. “You’ve got to keep the lines of communication open.”

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