Webspeak: The Secret Language of Teens

Not All Texting Is Bad, Some Experts Say

What are teen really saying in their cryptic text messages and instant messages?

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Jan. 25, 2007 — If, like most teens today, your child spends hours sending text messages from his phone and instant messages from his computer, you probably have overheard phrases like "LOL" or "BRB," without understanding what they meant.

Web lingo is a quick, fun way for kids to communicate using cell phones and computers, and, with 14 million teens texting regularly, it's the new social currency. For example, almost any teen or tween knows that "BRB" means "be right back" and that "TTYL" is "talk to you later."

But now, the use of slang and abbreviations is not limited just to e-mails, text messages or instant messages. It is showing up in kids' schoolwork, in their SAT essays and in college admission applications.

Sara Goodman, who teaches high school English and journalism at Clarksburg High in Clarksburg, Md., said she worries that this new language will compromise students' ability to write and to communicate.

"Most of these kids started using IM when they were between the ages of 8 and 10," Goodman said. "So they learned it when they were learning the other grammar rules."

Learning Webspeak at the same time, then, means kids focus on the grammatical form that they use more often, which is IM and text-message abbreviations, Goodman said.

"I have definitely seen an increase in this type of shorthand. They're using it pretty much everywhere. It's just seeped into their daily language."

Webspeak is so ingrained in most students' communication skills that they inadvertently use the language all the time, even where it might be inappropriate.

"I've been texting so much that I wrote the letters 'u-r' instead of 'y-o-u-r' and the letter 'r' instead of the word 'are,'" said Michelle Sloan, a Clarksburg High freshman, of a paper she wrote for school. "My teacher came up to me and told me my mistake, and I felt kind of stupid."

Michelle's mother, Kathy Sloan, said she is concerned about being clueless about this new language.

"I feel cut off from Michelle with all this texting and IMing," Sloan said. "You don't know what they're saying to each other; you don't know what's being discussed."

Parents like Sloan don't know, for instance, that "MOS" means "mom over shoulder," a phrase kids might use when discussing a new boyfriend or something a lot scarier like drugs. The shorthand "420" is code for smoking or buying marijuana.

How to Keep Up
Webspeak is a code that kids may use to keep secrets from their parents, but they are more likely to keep in touch with their parents if they can text or IM them.

In fact, almost 70 percent of all parents today are texters, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project. These parents know that kids are more likely to respond to a text message than to a phone call.

Web sites like www.transl8it.com and www.lingo2word.com translate Web lingo into plain English, and vice versa, which can facilitate parent-child communication.

Parents find that communicating online, for instance, via IM, might be more conducive to transparency than a regular face-to-face conversation.

Not Everyone Thinks Web Slang Is Bad News
"The use of language in a new way is really a good thing," said Deborah Tannen, Ph.D., linguistics professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. and author of "YOU'RE WEARING THAT? Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation." "It means you're adapting. And we often find that young people are at the forefront of language change."

Webspeak reflects a versatility that may actually be a strength, as long as the new language is used appropriately, according to Tannen.

"You need to use language that's appropriate to the context, just as you need to dress in a way that's appropriate to the context," Tannen says. "Adults look silly when they try to dress like kids. They might sound a little silly trying to talk like kids."

What Parents Can Do

Emphasize the importance of proofreading any written material. When a language like this becomes second nature, it may be difficult to break the habit when necessary, and spell or grammar checks usually will not catch this type of error. College professors do not want abbreviations or slang in term papers, just as employers do not want to see it in company memos.

Phrases Parents Should Know

KPC: keeping parents clueless

POS: parent over shoulder

420: marijuana

NIFOC: nude in front of computer

For more information on learning Web lingo, visit:

netlingo.com