

Quick! Tell Us What KUTGW Means

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By Stephanie Raposo

Kate Washburn didn't know what to make of the email a friend sent to her office with the abbreviation "NSFW" written at the bottom. Then she clicked through the attached sideshow, titled "Awkward Family Photos." It included shots of a family in furry "nude" suits and of another family alongside a male walrus in a revealing pose.

After looking up NSFW on NetLingo.com—a Web site that provides definitions of Internet and texting terms—she discovered what it stood for: "Not safe for work."



"If I would have known it wasn't safe for work, I wouldn't have taken the chance of being inappropriate," says Ms. Washburn, 37 years old, a media consultant in Grand Rapids, Mich.

As text-messaging shorthand becomes increasingly widespread in emails, text messages and Tweets, people like Ms. Washburn are scrambling to decode it. In many offices, a working knowledge of text-speak is becoming de rigueur. And at home, parents need to know the lingo in order to keep up with—and sometimes police—their children.

One reason for the surge in texting abbreviations—more than 2,000 and counting, according to NetLingo—is the boom in social-media sites like Twitter, where messages are limited to 140 characters. Text messages, too, are limited in length, so users have developed an alphabet soup of shorthand abbreviations to save time, and their thumbs.

Taking time to learn the jargon may seem like a WOMBAT ("Waste of money, brains and time"). But with over one trillion text messages sent and received in the U.S. last year, according to CTIA-The Wireless Association, an industry trade group, you run the risk of feeling out of it if you don't.

"If a CEO does not appear to be tech-savvy, people may start to wonder, 'Is the company not plugged into today's technologies also?'" says Stephanie Grayson, a corporate speech and media trainer based in New York.

Say What?

A sampling of some popular shorthand texting terms from NetLingo.com:

- UG2BK . . . You got to be kidding
- GBTWGet back to work
- NMPNot my problem
- PIR Parent in room
- GFTDGone for the day
- FYEOFor your eyes only
- BI5 Back in five minutes
- DEGTDon't even go there
- BIL Boss is listening
- PAWParents are watching
- 99Parents are no longer watching
- PCMPlease call me
- IMSI am sorry
- TOYThinking of you
- KUTGWKeep up the good work
- CIDConsider it done
- FWIWFor what it's worth
- HANDHave a nice day
- IATI am tired
- NRNNo response necessary
- 4COLFor crying out loud
- WRUDWhat are you doing
- LMIRLLet's meet in real life
- ^5High five

The confusion has given rise to a number of resources that provide English translations for terms like WRUD (“What are you doing?”) and TTYL (“Talk to you later”)—among them independent Web sites like NetLingo.com and UrbanDictionary.com and corporate ones like LG Mobile Phones’ DTXTR.com. Textapedia, a pocket guide to texting terms released last year, is sold in over 4,000 stores nationwide. NetLingo reports a 391% increase in the number of unique visitors over the past five years, while UrbanDictionary says it saw a 40% jump in its unique visitors last June from June 2008.

Both the AP Stylebook and Merriam-Webster Dictionary recognized texting shorthand for the first time in their 2009 editions, which were released in June. The AP Stylebook now includes IMO (“In my opinion”), ROFL (“Rolling on the floor laughing”) and BFF (“Best friends forever”), among others. Merriam-Webster defines LOL (“Laugh out loud”) and OMG (“Oh my God”).

“These abbreviations have shown they are very likely to be a part of our language for a long time,” says Peter Sokolowski, editor at large at Merriam-Webster.

Branding strategist Elizabeth Kanna, 50, maintains a “Mom’s Text Talk Sheet,” a cheat sheet of over 30 textisms created and updated constantly by her three teenage daughters, on her desk at work. Ms. Kanna, who lives in Sacramento, Calif., says she refers to it daily as many of her clients prefer communicating through text shorthand like SWDYT (“So what do you think?”) and WDYM (“What do you mean?”).

Bert Martinez Communications LLC, a Houston-based consulting firm, hired a 20-year-old and two teenagers last fall to help teach texting vernacular to its staff of six. “It gave us the confidence that we could use the lingo

and connect with the younger clientele on their level,” says Bert Martinez, president of the firm, which now conducts about 20% of its communication with clients via texting.

Teenagers, for their part, text in code for a reason, says Anne Mitchell, president of the Institute for Social Internet Public Policy, based in Boulder, Colo. “It is usually because they are involved in activities which they don’t want their parents to discover, such as casual sex, drugs and alcohol,” she says. Indeed, parents may be startled by such popular terms as GNOC (“Get naked on camera”), POS (“Parent over shoulder”), LMIRL (“Let’s meet in real life”) and IWSN (“I want sex now”).

Susan Avery, senior editor at ParentDish.com, AOL’s parenting Web site, says she has observed parents becoming more concerned about not knowing what their kids are talking about. “The best thing is to embrace it and use it as a bonding experience with your child,” she says.

Shannon Snyder, a writer in Vancouver, B.C., uses DTXTR.com to monitor her children. “I don’t want my kid to be the racist or the rude kid because he’s repeating a random composition of letters he heard someone else say in school and thought it was cool,” says Ms. Snyder, 34.

The fact that 15-year-old Jack Beisel’s mother uses texting shortcuts like HBU (“How about you?”) and CIL (“Check in later”) strengthens their relationship, he says. “It makes her seem like she’s a little more understanding about modern culture,” says Mr. Beisel, who lives in Bayport, N.Y.

The consequences of misunderstanding the lingo can be mortifying. Cassandra McSparin, 23, of Jim Thorpe, Pa., knew a woman whose friend’s mother had died. The woman texted her friend: “I’m so sorry to hear about your mother passing away. LOL. Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

It turns out she thought LOL meant “Lots of love.”

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