

Unravel a teen's Web of intrigue

By **TENILLE BONO GUORE**
July 9, 2006

As the summer break begins, Internet security experts are urging parents to learn the lingo of the Web and delve into their children's on-line realm so they can become the first line of defense against predators and inappropriate Net surfing.

Children and teenagers use acronyms, jargon and other computer shorthand to make sure their conversations in chat rooms and when using instant messaging are indecipherable to the uninitiated.

American Internet consultant and Web specialist Erin Jansen has set up a dictionary of that new language at netlingo.com.

She said teenagers are no different than other computer users in creating their own language, but this lingo is designed to create a communication gap between children and parents.

Kids can have entire conversations on an openly viewed computer without parents knowing what is going on, she said.

"They are using it and parents don't know who they're using it with," Jansen said in a phone interview from her office in California's Silicon Valley.

"I've heard teens who've started these on-line, steamy affairs right in front of their parents, while their mom is cooking dinner, because parents don't know what they're saying."

And it is not only teenagers using this chat-room code. Adult-coined code words such as NIFOC (nude in front of computer) and TDTM (talk dirty to me) were making their way into teen chat, she said, cropping up alongside the teens' own terms such as PIR (parent in room).

But there is no reason for parents to be intimidated by the fluid and creative language being developed by their children, she said. Instead, they should learn the terms, visit the chat rooms and discuss the issue with their children.

"This is a language that's empowering these young people. They're helping to make up some of these terms. Parents shouldn't get angry. They should get into the loop as well, otherwise they're full of fear about something they don't know," Jansen said. In the 10 years since Don Tapscott of the University of Toronto wrote "Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation," the on-line world has embedded itself into almost every aspect of life to create what he terms a "generation lap," in which children overtake their parents in tech-savvy living.

That can be frightening for parents trying to protect children from the darker elements of the Internet, but Tapscott, a new-media expert, said the best response is decidedly low-tech.

Instead of relying on Net nannies or other protective software, Tapscott said families should use technology as a second line of defence, in addition to open and meaningful conversation.

"If you don't like porn, then job No. 1 is to convince your kids it has no place in your home," Tapscott said. "You can't be monitoring everything your kid does. Blocking software is great, but you really need to talk about this stuff. Make it a positive thing."

He suggested that families should discuss their values, reach a united conclusion on what is allowed and then agree on a "social contract" that makes clear why such measures are needed.

"You need to design your family in ways we never did before," he said. "This is about taking an opportunity to open up communication and enable parents and kids to come to common conclusions about things."

With children as young as five now possessing basic computer knowledge, Microsoft Canada community affairs director Gavin Thompson said it is important that parents aren't alarmed by the issue of on-line safety. They should embrace the Internet as a "new layer of parenting," Thompson said.

"Before, kids were the IT experts in the house. With the rise of Net security, parents are taking on the challenge themselves and kids are asking them these (security) questions," Thompson said. "We're seeing a trend now that kids are looking to their parents for guidelines."

A series of workshops run by Microsoft have helped to introduce parents around the country to chat rooms, instant messaging and other Internet features that are now staples in many teens' lives.

"The Web is a space. You have to be aware of everything, and you are putting it out there in front of a lot of people," Thompson said. "Tell kids not to give out information, to be careful, and remember they're in a public space. If kids feel uncomfortable, they should tell their parents."

In a Media Awareness Network survey, several 11- to 14-year-old girls interviewed said they disguised their identities in chat rooms, but admitted it was impossible to maintain a false identity. They eventually revealed personal information when they felt they could trust a person, they said, but it could take just 15 minutes for that trust to be established.

Thompson said key Web sites for parents seeking more information include netlingo.com and safety.sympatico.msn.ca.