

Web site GPAC (gives parents a clue) on Net lingo

By CAMILLA A. HERRERA, The Stamford Advocate

Published: Sunday, Dec. 31, 2006

Admit it.

No matter how hard a parent tries to understand a child, it sometimes seems like the kids are communicating in a different language.

Truth is, they are, says Erin Jansen, an Internet specialist and founder of NetLingo.com, an online dictionary of "cyber-speak" that has sprung up since the development of the Internet.

"Millenials (today's kids) are the ones coming up with the acronyms, and I think this is empowering for them," she says.

Adolescents use a constantly evolving jargon of acronyms, abbreviations and shorthand while chatting online in public and private chat rooms and on social networking sites as well as through e-mail and instant messages.

"I try to talk to friends on the phone," says Danielle Lanslots, a senior at Stamford High School in Stamford, Conn. "Calling does save money. But with close friends, IMing and texting is more convenient and you can avoid awkward phone conversations." It's part of a larger trend among computer users to adopt much of the "talk of the Internet" in daily written and verbal communication.

The only difference is kids specifically use the talk to KPC (keep parents clueless).

"I have nothing to hide, but it's a question of privacy," says Lanslots, who lists LOL (laugh out loud), LOLA (laugh out loud again), BRB (be right back) and TTYL (talk to you later) as acronyms she commonly uses with her friends.

"There are definitely some things we are talking about that we don't want (parents) to see. I've used POS (parent over shoulder)." No surprise there. We, too, actively hid what we could from our parents, using pointed slang and signals only friends understood. Our children are following in our footsteps.

But parents should be on guard, Jansen says.

"The danger lies in a different place from what we tried to hide from our parents," she says. "When we were doing this, we weren't on the Internet. (The) Internet has exposed us to all kinds of people all over the world." The potential exposure of personal information and the associated risks that come with such exposure make it more important than before to understand what the kids are saying to their friends, even if they don't want us to.

It's a matter of safety, says Sgt. Joe Kennedy, who heads the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force for the Stamford Police youth bureau.

"As parents, we're looking at this new language and now we need to learn it," he says.

The lists Jansen maintains show countless terms that may intimidate, but how the expressions are formed soon becomes clear. Unfortunately, many of these meanings can shock, reminding parents of predator dangers and how computer lingo can be used by someone who should not be communicating with children.

Jansen stresses her aim is not to alarm parents, in part because most teens do not use sexual predatory language with each other.

"These acronyms are from the adults," Jansen says. "They are the ones teaching the kids TDTM (talk dirty to me) or IWSN (I want sex now).

"But adult acronyms are making their way into this teen-speak, " she says. "So this really should be about discussing Internet safety with your kids. Forget about generation lap, the belief that kids are technologically savvier than parents. There is little choice but to become educated.

"Like anything in parenting, we need to be involved in kids' lives now, because so much revolves around texting, IMing, social networking. They want it that way. And you won't be able to see or track, but you can be involved.

"They have to know that they are exposed to the whole world online. It's not just you and your girlfriends. Anyone can see what you post, over and over." Begin by disallowing a computer in a child's room. "It should be in the busiest room in the house where the normal traffic allows you to look over your kid's shoulder," Kennedy says.

Know passwords for all accounts, including those for social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook.

"Set up your own page," Kennedy says. "Make up information, but this way you see how it works." Other tips include checking search and chat histories and downloading monitoring software.

"They are going to reject that," Jansen warns. "Be up to speed about the thinking and the risks. They should know that it's not only their high-school group reading what they're blogging about."

OnGuardOnline.gov, a federal site that offers tips to help protect against Internet fraud, identity theft, phishing, spam scams and sexual predators, says: "If (your kids) use social networking sites, tell them why it's important to keep information like their name, Social Security number, address, phone number and family financial information – like bank or credit card account numbers – to themselves. Remind them that they should not share that information about other people in their family or about their friends, either."

The site, sponsored by the Federal Trade Commission, Homeland Security, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Postal Inspection Service, Department of Commerce and the Securities and Exchange Commission, recommends keeping screen names and e-mail addresses free of personal information, avoiding the posting of personal pictures and restricting access to anyone but friends and family.

Lanslots has discussed such issues with her parents, she says, admitting she recently closed her MySpace account after her mother voiced concerns.

"There is that feeling that someone is watching you, so you want to watch what you say," she says. "Kids should know that anyone can end up using those symbols and abbreviations."