

A sea of flourishing red faces as test casts its spell

SYDNEYSIDERS and Melburnians have been left red-faced after a survey showed more than two-thirds of them have trouble spelling the word embarrass.

The Galaxy survey asked 400 people aged over 16 years to spell eight commonly misspelled words.

About 70 per cent could not spell

accommodation, one in two could not spell accessory and a quarter could not spell February. Other words that presented problems included guarantee, opportunity, eighth and receipt.

In the survey, women respondents did better than men. The spelling of only 7 per cent of participants in

Sydney and Melbourne was flawless. The survey found people aged 25 to 34 had some homework to do, ranking among the worst spellers.

The children's author Deborah Abela said spell check and text message abbreviations were harming people's spelling skills.

They could affect how people perceived general intelligence and could even affect one's ability to get and keep a job, she said.

Westpac commissioned the survey and sponsors the NSW Premier's Spelling Bee for primary school pupils, which begins next month.

MARY COUSTAS

Our fight for our son



Comedian Mary Coustas wishes she could see the lighter side of her husband George Betsis being stuck in Los Angeles amid allegations he abducted his own son.

'But this isn't funny, it's very serious - and complicated' says Mary, who's best known as her Acropolis Now alter ego Effie, and now cuts a forlorn figure in her kitchen in Sydney's Bondi.

Until a year ago, the home was filled with the laughter of her 10 year old stepson Tomas, from George's relationship with

renowned baby listener and opera singer Priscilla Dunstan.

DESTINY'S CHILD

'We're talking about a child's life here and we're at the precipice in terms of which way Tom's destiny is going to go', the heartbroken star says.

'I know the battles we can't win, but I'm hoping this abduction allegation is a battle we can win, and it will be a motivating force to get Tom back to Australia', Mary adds.

A year ago Tom's mother who has appeared in Oprah took her son to live in LA. It was on the proviso that Tom return to Australia to spend every holiday with his advertising executive father and actress stepmother, whom Tom lovingly calls 'Marebear'.

Three months after leaving Australia, Priscilla cut off all communication. Tom didn't come home at Christmas or Easter and for seven months he dropped off his dad's radar.

'We had no idea where he was. They had moved, so in a sense she had abducted Tom', Mary 44 says. 'After many unanswered phone calls and emails George had to hire private detectives to find Tom'.

RISKY REUNION

Contacting the LA County District Attorney's office and the LAPD with his intentions George 49, went to the US in April. On April 3 he waited outside Tom's school in prestigious Pacific Palisades, approaching him as school broke up for two weeks.

'It was difficult to convince Tom to come with me', George says from LA. 'He was worried I'd be charged with kidnapping him. I promised him it would all be OK. It was a chance I was prepared to take'.

Reconnecting with his dad over a game of footy Tom was also back in daily internet contact with his Marebear, family and friends. It only convinced Mary how much Tom missed home.

'Tom's so isolated in America', she says. 'He's got no history there, no family. I just wished I could reach through the screen and give him a hug.'

'He's on the other side of the world with no grandparents, no cousins, no friends, no us, no dog, no Bondi - all the things that he was so empowered by and happy about and excited about. It breaks your heart'.

PLANS ON HOLD

After 12 days in hiding with his dad, Tom was returned to his mum. Priscilla has taken out a restraining order against George, banning him from approaching her or Tomas.

Meanwhile, George has surrendered his passport until he can answer the charge of child abduction this week. Priscilla was also told to hand in Thomas' passport to authorities until the matter is resolved.

It's a fight Mary who's just returned to Australia after five weeks with George, encourages her husband of six years to continue - even though the separation means putting on hold plans to add to their family.

'I'd hate the idea that Tom would think we'd abandoned him - we don't want him to think we've given up on him', says Mary, who's been trying 'for quite a while to give Tom the brother or sister he wants'.