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## MySpace or YourSpace? Using MySpace.com and other web pages in forensic evaluations of adolescents and children

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## MySpace or YourSpace?

Using MySpace.com and other web pages in forensic evaluations of adolescents and children.

*Jessica Griffin, Psy.D.*

“You know, I wasn’t born yesterday...,” words said to one of the many teenage and prepubescent faces that enter the office doors.

However, in some respects, myself and many in the forensic arena may have been born yesterday. With technology changing so rapidly, it is easy feel like a neophyte when it comes to computers and the fluency with which our children speak the windows language.

Within the last two years, I

have discovered that the MySpace/Facebook/Twitter phenomenon is an effective way to connect with children, particularly hard-to-reach adolescents. I have also found the information on these web pages to be invaluable to forensic work with this age group.

I have utilized *MySpace.com* and other social networking sites in evaluations for Probate and Family Court matters (e.g. as GAL in divorce and custody matters) as well as in the Juvenile

Justice arena (e.g. Competence to Stand Trial and dispositional matters).

Known to some as the “Colombo” approach to forensic work, many find purposeful naiveté to be a valuable tool. With teenagers, this has been an effective way to both disarm them and to engage them in providing useful personal information. Accessing *MySpace.com* pages is a primary arena in which this intentional gullibility has been effective.

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## Cultural Competency Project – Lowell

*Joanna Bunker Rohrbaugh, Ph.D.*

As part of the AFCC Roundtables, First Justice Jay Blitzman of the Lowell Juvenile Court invited all professionals who interact with the court to come and discuss the issues with him and fellow AFCC board member Joanna Rohrbaugh.

About 15 professionals affiliated with the court came to the first meeting on April 27<sup>th</sup>, and decided

to hold another meeting on May 13<sup>th</sup> in order to involve people from community organizations and social service agencies throughout Lowell.

Almost 40 people attended the second meeting, including professionals affiliated with 15 different social service agencies and organizations.

Each person at the meeting described what they have

experienced as the most challenging aspects of cultural diversity in Lowell, which has a large Cambodian immigrant community. The following five main issues or themes were discussed at both meetings:

**Communication difficulties**

▪ **Language** – The client may not be fluent in English, and the provider may be unaware of the nuances in the client’s language, even when an interpreter is used.

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## MySpace or YourSpace?, continued

Engaging youth in a conversation about MySpace.com, Facebook, etc. and accessing these websites in our offices with them are ways to open the door with children and teenagers, and allows us to see the image that they wish to be projected onto the world.

A Rogerian groupie could argue that this is similar to the “real self” versus the “ideal self.” However, it is open to debate which image is projected onto the MySpace page.

As the internet is also an area in which children can be exploited, manipulated, bullied, or harmed in other ways, it is often critical to have access to this information, particularly as many of the children who enter our offices appear to be especially vulnerable to harm.



### A MySpace Primer

*The first disclaimer.* I do not own or operate a MySpace page. [There are a number of reasons for this, professionally, but that is a different topic for a different day]. With adolescents, I use the fact that I do not have a MySpace page to allow them to “help” me figure out how to access their information.

*The second disclaimer.* The intersection between the Internet (e.g., MySpace, YouTube, virtual worlds) and professional disciplines (e.g., Psychology, Education, the Law) is a rapidly growing area of area of interest, and is also a hotbed for innumerable

ethical concerns and dilemmas. Although the ethical and privacy concerns need to be considered, I cannot adequately address them within this article. I think that it is not an infringement of privacy rights to ask to see a child's MySpace, however, because at this point in the interview I have already fully explained my role, the purpose of evaluation, and the limits of confidentiality.

During the interview, I simply ask if the child if they have a MySpace page and then tell them that I'm curious about MySpace [e.g. “I'm curious about MySpace...I talk to lots of kids and teenagers about MySpace and I really like to see the different pages that kids have...etc.”] and wonder if they will allow me to see their page.

Then, I demonstrate my excitement in their wanting me to see their page and immediately pull up the web browser. I type in [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com) and then ask them to show me how to get onto their page. To date, my request to see an adolescent's pages has never been turned down.

The child then logs on using their username and password and voila, instant access to information.

Once on the youth's page, you can see a picture of them, their online name, and how they describe their “Mood,” for which they often use “emoticons” (aka smiley faces).

All of this information can enhance the evaluator's understanding of the youngster in the office. For instance, in a case involving an Assault and Battery of a Police Officer, one adolescent girl's username was similar to “cop killer” and demonstrated a cartoon defecating on a policeman. This information was helpful to the girl's attorney because it provided a concrete example of the girl's poor judgment and (mis)understanding of her legal situation, which were both in question during an assessment of the girl's competence.

On the MySpace pages you can see the youth's “friends,” which are individuals to whom the child or adolescent has granted access. The adolescent is able to communicate with these “friends” through the MySpace pages belonging to the “friends.”

Many youth have “blogs” which are basically a journal of their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Others can also write comments on the youth's MySpace pages. After reviewing the youth's pages, I record my observations and print the pages on my printer.

Here are some examples of the information that MySpace has provided in my clinical and forensic work:

◆ A teenage girl with a history of depression posted information about her moods and suicidal thinking, which she had previously denied experiencing

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## MySpace or YourSpace?, continued

when she talked with her parents and therapist.

◆ In a case where there were concerns about adequate parental supervision, a teenage girl posted provocative pictures of herself scantily clad using alcohol and illegal drugs. This page was dated during a time in which the parent in question was supposed to be home and in the caretaker role.

◆ Confirmation of a young girl's gang involvement, which she had previously denied.

◆ Information that demonstrated an adolescent's poor judgment in grasping the severity of the charges against him.

◆ A 9-year-old's eloquent description of her involvement in the inter-parental conflict.

◆ Descriptions of an adolescent's wish to have a child of her own.

◆ Bullying of a child by other peers, which was unknown to the parent

◆ A teenager who posted somewhat provocative pictures of herself and also included her address, school, age, and other personal information. This girl had her site as "public," meaning that anyone could go online to view this information.

In sum, for those who were born yesterday and have not attempted to discuss *MySpace* pages with clients, I encourage you to give it a try. ▣

### Glossary of Terms

**Facebook and MySpace:** Free-access social networking websites, used internationally. These sites include personal profiles, networks of "friends," blogs, photos, and can also include videos or music. On Facebook, users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with other people.

**Emoticon:** a smiley face, or other face which demonstrates whatever "mood" a person is in

**Blog:** from the term, "weblog," an online journal, diary, or commentary often updated several times a day

**Friend Request:** when a person asks someone to be their "friend," which grants them mutual access to their social networking pages

**Twitter/Tweet:** Twitter is a free social networking and blogging service that enables its users to instantly send and read each others' updates, known as tweets. Tweets are short text-based posts of up to 140 characters, displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to other users (e.g., "followers") who have subscribed to them.

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