



The association of parenting style and child age with parental limit setting and adolescent MySpace behavior

Larry D. Rosen^{a,*}, Nancy A. Cheever^b, L. Mark Carrier^a

^a Department of Psychology, 1000 E. Victoria St., California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA 90747, USA

^b Department of Communications, California State University, Dominguez Hills, USA

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ABSTRACT

Parent and teen MySpace user pairs completed online surveys administered in June ($N = 266$) and September 2006 ($N = 341$) to assess relationships between parenting styles and limit setting and monitoring of online behaviors, the prevalence of Internet dangers and pre-teen and teen MySpace behaviors. Cross-comparison measures of MySpace usage, parenting style, limit setting/monitoring, MySpace problems, and media perceptions were used. Parenting styles were strongly related to adolescent MySpace experiences, behaviors, and attitudes, with some age differences. Parents with older children were more likely to have Neglectful or Indulgent parenting styles and less likely to set limits on online behavior. The extent of sexual solicitation, pornography, and cyberbullying was relatively low as compared with studies asserting a high incidence of Internet-related problems. Parents' high estimates of online dangers were not matched by their low rates of setting limits and monitoring teens. Theoretical and practical perspectives of the results are offered to enhance social networking experiences for parents and their children.

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1. Introduction

The media portrays the Internet as a dangerous place for adolescents (Lee, 2008). They warn of online predators, while parents are cautioned to keep their children safe by careful monitoring. NBC's *Dateline* aired "To Catch a Sexual Predator," a *Candid Camera*-like show intimating that the Internet is replete with adults waiting to entrap and molest teenage children. Recent research suggests that these fears might be unwarranted. In a five-year cross-sectional study from 2000 to 2005, Mitchell, Wolak and Finkelhor (2007) found a decline in unwanted sexual solicitations, but an increase in online harassment and unwanted exposure to pornography among Internet users aged 10 through 17 years.

When teens go online, they often log in to MySpace.com. MySpace is a virtual community that has exploded from its introduction in 2003 as a site for unknown musicians to reach an Internet audience of 59 million unique monthly visitors. Within three years it had blossomed into a full-blown social networking haven for adolescents. A recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart & Madden, 2007) found that 55% of online American youths aged 12 to 17 years use online social networking sites, nearly all (85%) on MySpace.

Despite the importance of MySpace to teens, little research has been done on its impact on MySpace users. An exception is Rosen's (2006) study of 1257 MySpace teens and adults, which found that more time spent on MySpace was correlated with more depression, more Internet addiction, lower self-esteem and more online friends; having more online friends was related to more Internet addiction, less shyness, and more honesty online. Although only 10% of the sample was under 18 years, Rosen reported that adolescent MySpacers were more addicted to the Internet than older users.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lrosen@csudh.edu (L.D. Rosen).

One variable that could be relevant to teen MySpace behavior is parenting. Baumrind (1991, revised by Macoby & Martin, 1983) identified two dimensions of parenting behavior—control/demandingness and warmth/reponsiveness—used to classify parents into one of four styles: (1) high control and low warmth was classified as an *Authoritarian* parenting style; (2) high control and high warmth defined as an *Authoritative* parenting style; (3) low control and high warmth reflected as an *Indulgent* style; and (4) low control and low warmth, denoted as an *Uninvolved* or a *Neglectful* style.

Research has found that parenting style is related to teen Internet behavior. Eastin, Greenberg and Hofschire (2006) examined how parents mediated Internet use and found that Authoritative parents used evaluative (co-viewing or discussing content) and restrictive techniques (placing time or content limits) more often than Authoritarian and Neglectful parents. In addition, Authoritative parents were more likely to use technological mediators (e.g., blocking software) than Authoritarian and Neglectful parents. In an earlier report prepared for the Smith Richardson Foundation, Greenberg, Hofschire, Eastin and Lachlan (2002) presented the finding that parenting style impacted the use of rules, discussion of content, blocking, and co-viewing across multiple media sources including video games, Internet, television, music, and videos. The Pew Internet & American Life Project (Macgill, 2007) reported that most parents try to stay involved in their teenagers' "online lives" — 65% of parents reported they check the websites their teen visits on a regular basis, while 74% said they can identify whether their teen has created a page on MySpace or Facebook. Eighty-five percent of parents reported they have "established rules about the kinds of personal information their child can share with people they talk to on the Internet" (p. vi). While parents reported being involved in their children's Internet activity, most (68%) also reported having regulations about which sites their child may visit, and how much time their teen spends online (55%). Almost half the teens in the study reported that their parents checked to see what websites they had visited. Further, parents' perception of whether Internet use is a "good thing" for their children decreased 8% from 2004 to 2006 (Macgill, 2007).

Previous research on how child age affects parental Internet monitoring has shown that parents of younger children are more likely to monitor child behavior. Based on a nationally representative sample of child Internet users and caregivers drawn in 1999–2000, Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2005) found that parents of younger children (10–15 years) were more likely to use filtering software. Based on a different nationally representative sample of online youth (12–17 years) and parents in 2000, Wang, Bianchi, and Raley (2005) reported that parents of younger teenagers engaged in a relatively higher level of parental monitoring than parents of older teenagers. Specifically, parents less often subjected older teens to time limits for Internet use and were less likely to place monitoring software on the computer when teens were older. However, age of the teen was not a statistically significant predictor of whether parents checked the websites their teens visited.

No study has looked at how parenting style affects teen MySpace use. The present research investigates parenting style and parental limit-setting and monitoring as factors in teens' MySpace behavior. Study 1 provides an overview of teen MySpace activities and examines parental perceptions of those activities and how they are or are not regulated overall and in terms of child age and sex. Study 1 also compared parent and teen perceptions of the impact of MySpace on teens, including the issue of sexual solicitation and its portrayal in the media. Study 2 replicates and extends this work by assessing the relationships among parenting style, parental limit setting, and teen MySpace usage. In addition, Study 2 provides a more detailed examination of potential MySpace problems (e.g., sexual solicitation, harassment, sexual and other negative images). The two studies explored the following hypotheses and research questions:

Hypothesis 1. Most parents will not monitor or limit teen MySpace activities (Studies 1 and 2).

1a: But parents will monitor younger children more than older children.

Hypothesis 2. Parenting style will be related to both teen MySpace activities and parental limit setting of those activities. More specifically, Authoritative parenting will lead to more positive MySpace behaviors, greater parental knowledge of their children's MySpace behaviors, and more parental limit setting and monitoring (Study 2).

Research question 1. How do teens use MySpace? (Studies 1 and 2)

Research question 1a: Are there developmental differences in the way that pre-teens, younger teens, and older teens use MySpace?
Research question 1b: Are there sex differences in the way that teens use MySpace?

Research question 2. To what extent are parents aware of teen MySpace activities? (Studies 1 and 2)

2a: Does parental awareness vary with the age of their child?

Research question 3. Do parents and teens agree on the prevalence of sexual solicitation and its media portrayal, and concerns about potential problems with MySpace involvement? (Studies 1 and 2)

3a: Are there any differences in parents' concerns for younger and older teens?
3b: Are there any differences in parents' concerns for daughters and sons?

Research question 4. What is the extent of MySpace problems (e.g., sexual solicitation, cyberbullying, exposure to pornography)? (Studies 1 and 2)

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