

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE LIVES OF ADOLESCENTS: How the Insane Clown Posse and Other Musical Subcultures May Be Influencing Your Diagnosis and Treatment

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Music is an important part of an adolescent's life. Adolescents spend on average 2 1/2 hours a day listening to music.¹ The music that adolescents choose to listen to and the groups that they identify with provide an opportunity to explore and express their feelings, enable them to feel less alone and isolated in the world, and help them feel more understood, all while fostering a sense of belonging that is important as they traverse the difficult process of growing up.² Teens often identify with artists and musical styles that reflect their identity and are drawn to music that expresses the issues they are dealing with in their lives.

Their musical preferences may point to the developmental and psychological themes they may be struggling with. Teens who prefer Pop and Dance music may tend to deal with developmental themes of relationships, autonomy and identity, and sociability, while teens who prefer Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, and Rap/Hip Hop may tend to deal with themes of hypersensitivity, feelings of rejection, poor family support, and lack of identity integration.³ It is important to recognize that each musical style and musical subgenre is unique and efforts should be made to understand how the individual teen interprets and engages the experience.

To demonstrate the complexity of musical subgenres and how they may influence our patients, this article will review Horrorcore in more depth.

HORRORCORE: A MUSICAL SUBGENRE

This article explores the subgenre of Horrorcore and one of its most popular bands, Insane Clown Posse (ICP) — which has captured the hearts, minds, and loyalty of some of today's disaffected youth with its musical lyrics and style, creating a *Juggalo* subculture — and how and why teens are drawn to this non-mainstream group and what being a Juggalo means to them. Then, we will explore how to engage adolescents on the topic of music in general and about ICP specifically so providers can better understand what music teen patients are listening to, what the music means to them, and how practitioners can use that information to support and guide treatment.

IDENTIFYING ICP FANS IN THE OFFICE: WHAT YOU MAY SEE AND WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Does the teen have a tattoo or wear a necklace of a man or woman running with a hatchet?

(see www.insaneclownposse.com for images) Does he or she enjoy drinking orange Faygo soda pop and having it sprayed on him or her at concerts? Does the patient identify as a Juggalo (or Juggalette)? Does he or she make a yearly trek in August to "The Gathering" to be with "The Family"? Does he or she come into your office and shout "Whoop whoop"?

If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes," then the patient might think of him or herself as a Juggalo or Down With The Clown.

ICP AND HORRORCORE: A JUGGALO HISTORY

ICP, formerly known as the Inner City Posse Gang, is a rap duo from Detroit, Michigan. Formed in 1991 by Joseph Bruce "Shaggy 2 Dope" and Joseph Ulster "Violent J," their personas are that of "wicked" clowns who send messages from a supernatural entity known as the Dark Carnival.⁴ They call their fans Juggalos and Juggalettes and their style of music is classified as Horrorcore. Generally speaking, Horrorcore is a subgenre of music that incorporates horror-themed lyrical content.

The moody, hardcore beats often accompany dark and aggressive lyrics about Satanism, murder, rape, cannibalism, and suicide. Horrorcore began in the 1990's with groups like the Geto Boys, Esham, and Grave Diggaz.⁵ ICP liked the style of these early groups, but in order to differentiate themselves, they traded in the themes of Satanism for a biblical mythology all their own. ICP's lyrics include profanity, misogyny, violence, and sophomoric phrases that draw some teen listeners. For example, their popular song "What is a Juggalo?" features common themes seen in ICP lyrics, such as⁶ :

*What is a juggalo?
Let me think for a second.
Oh, he gets butt-naked
And then he walks through the streets
Winking at the freaks
With a two-liter stuck in his butt-cheeks...*

*What is a Juggalo?
I don't know
But I'm down with the clown
And I'm down for life, yo...*

*What is a Juggalo?
He ain't a bitchboy
He'll walk through the hills
And beat down a rich boy...*

SOME ADOLESCENTS MAY CONNECT WITH ICP'S PERSONAL HISTORY OF ALIENATION

Reportedly, Joseph Bruce and Joseph Ulster grew up in poverty in Detroit and felt ostracized by those around them. They empowered themselves by turning the negative things said about them into something positive - first calling themselves Floobs and later Juggalos.⁶ One interpretation is that they embraced their persona as outsiders and expressed their anger and frustration with society through their music, which resonates with adolescents who come from difficult backgrounds and feel isolated and rejected by their families, schools, peers, and society. In clinical practice, teens drawn to ICP and similar bands may have higher levels of discomfort within their families and experience conflict with adults.

Our clinical experience is that some teens report they connect with ICP because they feel that ICP members come from similar social and familial circumstances and have had similar experiences. Thus, listening to their music and being part of the ICP Family provides some teens with a connection and sense of belonging that has otherwise been missing in their lives. Aligning with groups like ICP may allow teens the opportunity to feel accepted and provides validation for their feelings.⁷

JUGGALO FAITH: USING HORROR-BASED IMAGES TO SPREAD RELIGION?

Although many youth are casual listeners of ICP, there is a growing subculture of Juggalos who are living more than just the music. ICP music has developed into its own kind of mythology, which is reportedly based on a dream that Joseph Bruce had: The Dark Carnival. The Dark Carnival consists of the stories of six characters, Joker's Cards, each offering a lesson and encouraging and challenging people to get on a more righteous path and reach Shangri La, Juggalo Heaven.⁷

In their album, *The Wraith*, and with their song "Thy Unveiling," ICP reveals that everything they are and everything they have done is because of their belief in God and

their hope that all Juggalos will "find him." The Juggalo faith is reported to offer adolescents another way to feel connected instead of lost and alienated. The Juggalo faith is reportedly rooted in Christianity and uses the Dark Carnival to teach about morality by helping people to look at the choices they make in their lives, which can lead them to either Shangri La or Hell's Pit.

There are, of course, Juggalos who don't ascribe to this religious belief system and are fans because of the music and/or the sense of family they feel in association with ICP. Thus, it is important to ask how they relate to ICP to ascertain if they fully believe the religion/faith, enjoy humor and irony, or just appreciate being part of a deep-rooted musical family. An open and nonjudgmental approach on the part of the clinician is imperative when asking probing questions to avoid giving the patient a greater sense of alienation or the feeling that their belief system is being denigrated. If they believe in the religious aspect, then inquiring about what it means to them can be help-

HOW TO ASK TEENS ABOUT THEIR MUSIC

- Ask about their favorite artists and songs. Make an effort to listen to a song or two before their next session, and then talk with them about it. This will let you know what genres of music they like and possibly provide insight into some of the challenges and moods they experience, especially if they are using music to change or augment their moods.
- Ask them to show you their media device (iPod, MP3 player) in the office. Look at the band names, comment on those you recognize, inquire about others, and ask to listen to one or two of their favorite songs in the office. Talk with them about what makes those songs and bands so appealing.
- Ask about the circumstances in which they listen to music. Are they alone? Bored? Happy? Sad? Does the music help to change their moods?
- Use online music stores to hear music samples.
- Search for bands/song titles online if you need help deciphering lyrics.
- Search online to find artist videos and/or listen to songs. Comment and/or ask teens about the styles of clothes and dance and other observations.
- Practitioners can use song content and videos to discuss important topics, including but not limited to sex, violence, substance use, body image, and suicidal ideation.

ful in letting them express their own fears and worries about good and evil and how they see themselves on their journey to being a good person. Providing understanding and support around this topic may help alleviate any anxiety or fears the patient may have.

THE JUGGALO PHILOSOPHY ON FAMILY: EVERYONE IS WELCOME

While ICP's lyrics speak to challenging authority and rebellion, it is ultimately their Juggalo philosophy of acceptance and being part of a family that is most engaging to teens. The teaching is that no matter what your background is, you belong, and if you are part of the Juggalo/ICP Family, someone always has your back. Every year ICP and other Horrorcore artists on their record label Psychopathic Records hold a week-long concert for their fans called the Gathering where their fans come together to be with the people they call "family." The culture is one of unity, music, and fun, but can also involve sex, drug use, and violence. In an excellent documentary, "American Juggalo," director Sean Dunne asked attendees what it means to be a Juggalo, and the most popular response was "Family, like being home...Family love, it's a life style...You don't hate on people because they are different, love people...Down with the clown until we are dead in the ground."⁸

USING MUSIC IN TREATMENT: WHAT TO ASK, HOW TO ASK, AND HOW TO USE THE INFORMATION

Adolescents aren't always happy to be in our offices answering questions about the problems they are facing in their lives. Engaging teens by discussing music during an intake interview or during a follow up appointment can help relax the situation and build rapport with them, helping them to feel more comfortable opening up about their struggles. When clinicians ask about teens' music and what it means to them, it involves learning about them, who they are, who they identify with, and why.

It is important for providers to take the time and listen to some of the songs and watch the videos that teens enjoy because practitioners are encouraged to be open and honest about what they think about the music. It is important to be respectful and nonjudgmental to avoid alienation because the feeling of rejection from family, peers, and society further draws teens into the subculture and may impede the doctor-patient relationship. Perhaps most importantly, music means something different to each person, so resist drawing conclusions based on previous knowledge or experiences.

BEGIN BY ASKING TEENS IF THEY LIKE LISTENING TO MUSIC – THE ANSWER IS USUALLY YES!

The following provides examples of specific questions, using ICP as an illustration. Although the lyrics and images that ICP project may be disturbing or odd to us as providers or to our patient's parents, it is crucial to be open, respectful, inquisitive about what the music means to them. For example, try asking:

What does being a Juggalo mean to you?

Do they feel it provides them with a sense of family, a moral path, or do they just like the lyrics to the songs?

What do you like about ICP's music? Do you think ICP's music impacts your behaviors and mood in a positive or negative way?

Does it make them feel a certain way, does a certain song speak to an issue they are dealing with?

What do you think about the drug use that is talked about in the songs, seen in the videos, or offered at the gatherings?

Assess for their own personal use and if they do use, inquire about what it does for them. For example, does it help them escape problems? Is it a response to peer pressure? Knowing this can help us guide teens toward alternative ways to cope.

Why do you identify with ICP?

This question may elucidate social or family issues they are dealing with today.

It is important when asking about their musical interests that we are nonjudgmental, truly interested, and curious about what role music plays in their lives and what it means to them.

THE ROLE OF THE CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRIST

Exploring the musical and cultural themes adolescents are identifying with can provide valuable clues into how they are experiencing their world and dealing with such issues as identity, school, loss, and peer and family relationships. This can be helpful in treatment because it increases insight into how adolescents are coping with their problems. Those who are drawn to ICP may be dealing with family issues, a sense of rejection, and feelings of low self-worth. They may be searching for a connection, and this information can inform the treatment plan and improve our understanding of the youth and his or her needs.

For example, if teens are relying solely on music to help regulate mood and solve problems, and this coping strate-

gy proves unhelpful or unhealthy (increased mood and behavioral disturbance, legal issues, substance issues), then offering additional services (e.g., therapy, more positive music choices, alternative coping skills, increasing support, medication) becomes integral to the therapeutic intervention.

Research on music and teen development suggests that “It may be possible to expose adolescents to a greater variety of music, which may promote greater self-exploration, validation, and normalization of their issues, enhancing their development.”⁸ As such, music can be an excellent coping mechanism for teens. While the primary purpose in asking about teens’ musical tastes is to get a better understanding of their functioning and the role music plays in helping them cope, it is also important to determine if their association with the music or a group is leading to harm to self or others. If this information is elicited, a more in-depth intervention may be needed to assess the mental health aspects of the adolescent and to formulate a plan of treatment to address risks and increase breadth of coping methods.

Conclusions

It is important to understand and ask teens about their identification with popular cultures and themes in their music preferences because it provides practitioners with a window into their world. By learning about these preferences, we can better understand the positive and negative ways that music can influence teens’ lives and how they

are adapting to the challenges presented to them. Importantly, discussing culture and music facilitates open discussion and provides an opportunity to help teens work through their issues and be more successful and productive as they cope with the task of growing up.

Regardless of whether their patients are listening to ICP or Justin Bieber, providers must be open and willing to explore teens’ musical cultures in order to foster therapeutic relationships, gain valuable insight into their feelings, and help them feel supported. By being informed, open, inquisitive, and non-judgmental, clinicians can give teens a chance to teach them, while providing teens with a safe place to explore and express their emotions and feelings.

Take-Home Summary:

Music plays a pivotal role in the lives of children and adolescents, often providing them with an opportunity to explore their interests, feel accepted, and develop a sense of community. By recognizing the importance of musical groups and subcultures, providers can begin to gain a better understanding of their patients and engage with the world around them, allowing for improved treatment and more meaningful rapport-building.

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