

Pull the Plug on Explicit Lyrics

By James Sturm

James Sturm wrote this essay when he was a student at Kalamazoo College, where he graduated with a degree in international and area studies. As you read, notice how Sturm uses comparison as well as illustration to strengthen his argument.

Many kids pass through a rebellious phase in middle school. If the teacher asks them to stop throwing pencils, they toss one more. If the sign reads “No Trespassing,” they cross the line. If they hear their father listening to classical music, they tune in to rap and punk rock. Unfortunately, the lyrics in rap and punk rock can be quite explicit and may have a negative effect on impressionable youngsters. For this reason, music with explicit lyrics should be off-limits until the age of sixteen.

Currently, the government takes a rather laissez-faire attitude with regard to the music industry. Thousands of albums are readily available to young people regardless of explicit content. In fact, the main control mechanism for protecting youthful consumers from harmful content comes from the recording companies themselves. Under the Parental Advisory campaign of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), it is the responsibility of artists and record labels themselves to decide if their albums should receive the infamous “Parental Advisory: Explicit Content” label. Children are allowed to purchase the albums regardless (“Parental Advisory”).

This lack of regulation would not be a problem if the music did not produce negative effects on its listeners. Although it is difficult to prove statistically that music full of hateful content fuels similar attitudes in its listeners, it requires only common sense to understand why. That is, people are influenced by what they think about. If a child thinks, for example, that he is unimportant or unloved, then he will act out in various ways to gain attention from his peers. Problem thinking is a result of a variety of influences, including friends, parents, and the media. Negative music, if listened to frequently enough, naturally implants negative thoughts in the minds of its listeners.

Furthermore, consider the unique influence of music as opposed to other forms of media. Unlike movies, video games, and magazines, music has a way of saturating one’s mind. Everyone knows the feeling of having a song “stuck” in their head, repeating itself throughout the day. Unlike a movie, which is seen once, discussed among friends, and then forgotten, a song

can remain lodged in one's mind for weeks on end. And if the songs are steeped in content such as violence against women, happiness found in harmful drugs, and hatred of the police, **these themes will continue reverberating in the minds of the listener, slowly desensitizing them to otherwise repulsive ideas.** Becoming numb to such ideas is the first step toward passively agreeing with them or even personally acting on them.

Whereas adults can use to listen to such music with no behavioral ramifications, children are far more susceptible to its subtle influence. With less experience of life, a lower level of maturity, and a lack of long-term thinking, young people are prone to make impulsive decisions. **Providing them with access to music that fuels negative and harmful thoughts is a dangerous decision.** We live in an age where violent tragedies such as school shootings are increasingly commonplace. Although various factors contribute to such acts of violence, hatred-themed music is likely a part of the equation. Therefore, **given the influential power of music and the heightened effect it can have on those still in the developmental stage of their lives, young people should have limited access to music with explicit lyrics.**

Sixteen years of age would be a reasonable cut-off. Until children reach that age, they should not be allowed to purchase music with a Parental Advisory label. At sixteen, they are becoming young adults and making more and more of their own decisions. Before sixteen, they are weathering the turbulent transition from middle school to high school. This transition should not be accompanied by music that promotes rebellion as a means of coping with stress and difficulty. After reaching age sixteen, however, **most young people will have obtained a driver's license, and the freedom that it allows eliminates the possibility of protecting youth from certain music.** That is, those with a driver's license can seek out their own venues to hear explicit content, whether concerts or elsewhere.

The main critique of efforts to curtail young teens' access to explicit music is not new. Many say that it's pointless to censor music's explicit content because, as the RIAA's Web site contends, "music is a reflection, not a cause; it doesn't create the problems our society faces, it forces us to confront them" ("Freedom of Speech"). It is true that music reflects our culture. But it is also true that music fuels the **perpetuation** of that culture, for better or for worse. Guarding youth from explicit music does not **equate** to ignoring the issues raised in the music. It merely delegates that talk to adults rather than to children.

Another critique says that limiting youth access to explicit music would take a financial toll on the music industry. This is true, but it would also force the music industry to adapt. We can either allow the youth of our nation to adapt to the music industry, or we can force the industry to adapt to an impressionable generation of kids.

A third critique is that even if explicit music were restricted to those of a certain age, younger kids would find access to it anyway. This is a legitimate concern, especially given the explosion of music-downloading software. But if not only music outlet stores but also online companies such as Amazon.com and iTunes were included in the regulations, progress would surely come.

Hip-hop artist Ja Rule has spoken in favor of the current Parental Advisory system, saying, “That’s what we can do as musicians to try to deter the kids from getting that lyrical content.” But he added, “I don’t think it deters the kids—it’s just another sticker on the rap right now” (Bowes). Even some hip-hop artists agree that protecting the minds of our youth is a necessity. But until laws are passed to restrict access to this music, the “Parental Advisory” label will just be another logo on the CD cover.

Works Cited

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