

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

Impact of Music Lyrics and Music Videos on Children and Youth (RE9144)

Committee on Communications

MUSIC LYRICS

Music lyrics have undergone dramatic changes since the introduction of rock music more than 40 years ago. This is an issue of vital interest and concern for parents and pediatricians.

During the past four decades, rock music lyrics have become increasingly explicit—particularly with reference to sex, drugs, and violence.^{1,2} Recently, heavy metal and “gangsta rap” music lyrics have elicited the greatest concern. In some cases lyrics communicate potentially harmful health messages.³ Such lyrics are of special concern in today’s environment, which poses unprecedented threats to the health and well-being of adolescents. Pregnancy, drug use, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (and other sexually transmitted diseases), injuries, homicide, and suicide have all become part of the landscape of everyday life for many American teens.^{3,4}

At the same time, music is important to teenagers’ identity and helps them define important social and subcultural boundaries.⁵ The results of one survey of 2760 14- to 16-year-olds in 10 different southeastern cities showed that they listened to music an average of 40 hours per week.⁶ One Swedish study found that adolescents who developed an early interest in rock music were more likely to be influenced by their peers and less influenced by their parents than older adolescents.⁷

To date, no studies have documented a cause-and-effect relationship between sexually explicit or violent lyrics and adverse behavioral effects.⁸ A possible explanation for this lack of finding is that teenagers often do not know the lyrics or fully comprehend their meaning. For example, in one study only 30% of teenagers knew the lyrics to their favorite songs, and their comprehension varied greatly.⁹ For this reason, publishing the lyrics separately could be counterproductive. At the same time, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) feels that parents should be knowledgeable about the content of their teenagers’ music. Therefore, the AAP feels that specific descriptive labeling of music content (eg, violence, sex, drugs, offensive language) would be desirable. Only one

study has examined the impact of parental advisory labels, and it found that teens were not more likely to be attracted simply because of the labeling.¹⁰

Most teenagers tend to interpret their favorite songs as being about “love, friendship, growing up, life’s struggles, having fun, cars, religion, and other topics that relate to teenage life.”^{11,p.393} However, for a small subgroup of teenagers, music preference may be highly significant. Numerous studies indicate that a preference for heavy metal music may be a significant marker for alienation, substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, suicide risk, sex-role stereotyping, or risk-taking behaviors during adolescence.^{6,12-22}

The AAP strongly opposes censorship. At the same time the AAP is greatly concerned that negative behavioral messages are being recorded and repeatedly broadcast. By law, (the Federal Communications Act of 1934), the public owns the airways, which are leased back to radio and television stations that are obligated to produce programming in the public’s best interest. Awareness of, and sensitivity to, the potential impact of music lyrics by consumers, the media, and the music industry is crucial. It is in children’s best interest to listen to lyrics that are not violent, sexist, drug-oriented, or antisocial.

Although the evidence is incomplete, based on our knowledge of child and adolescent development, the AAP believes that parents should be aware of pediatricians’ concerns about the possible negative impact of music lyrics.

Therefore, the AAP recommends that:

1. Pediatricians should encourage parents to take an active role in monitoring music that their children and adolescents are exposed to and which they purchase.
2. Pediatricians should join with educators and parents in local and national coalitions to discuss the effects of music lyrics on children and adolescents.
3. The public, and parents in particular, should be made aware of sexually explicit, drug-oriented, or violent lyrics on compact discs, tapes, music videos, and the Internet. The music industry should develop and apply a system of specific content-labeling of music regarding violence, sex, drugs, or offensive lyrics. If labeling is not done voluntarily by the music industry, then regulation should be developed to make it mandatory.
4. Broadcasters and the music industry should be encouraged to demonstrate sensitivity and self-

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restraint in decisions regarding what is produced, marketed, and broadcast.

5. Performers should be encouraged to serve as positive role models for children and teenagers.
6. Research should be developed concerning the impact music lyrics have on the behavior of adolescents and preadolescents.

MUSIC VIDEOS

Music video formats are popular among children and adolescents. When music lyrics are illustrated in music videos, their potential impact is magnified.^{3,5,23,24} Teenagers who may not “hear” or understand rock lyrics cannot avoid the often disturbing images that characterize a growing number of videos. In addition, music videos are self-reinforcing: if viewers hear a song after having seen the video version, they immediately “flash back” to the visual imagery in the video.¹⁷ Music videos may represent a relatively new art form, but it is one that often contains an excess of sexism, violence, substance abuse, suicides, and inappropriate sexual behavior.²⁵⁻²⁸

With 70% of American households receiving cable television,²⁹ most teenagers have access to Music Television (MTV) and VH-1 and watch an average of a half hour to 2 hours of music videos daily.^{5,30} Content analyses indicate that up to 75% of concept music videos (those involving a theme instead of a concert performance) contain sexually suggestive material.^{25,26} More than half contain violence, which often includes acts committed against women.^{25,26} Women are frequently portrayed in a condescending manner.^{27,28} Alcohol and tobacco use are also glamorized in many music videos that teenagers view.³¹ As with music lyrics, teenagers’ ability to comprehend and interpret music videos may vary widely and may represent an important variable in their potential impact.^{5,32,33}

A handful of experimental studies indicate that music videos may have a significant behavioral impact by desensitizing viewers to violence³⁴⁻³⁶ and by making teenagers more likely to approve of premarital sex.³⁷ In one study, eliminating access to MTV decreased the frequency of violent acts among teenagers and young adults in a locked treatment facility.³⁸

The AAP recommends the following:

1. Pediatricians should counsel parents to monitor television viewing and to recognize that television is a potent teacher of children and adolescents. As with other media, television exposure to content involving sex, violence, or drug use should be regulated by parents in accordance with the age and maturity of their children and adolescents.
2. Pediatricians should counsel parents to become media-literate. This means watching television with their children and teenagers, discussing the content with them, and initiating the process of selective viewing at an early age.
3. Music video producers should be encouraged to exercise sensitivity and self-restraint in what they depict, as should networks in what they choose to air.

4. The music video industry should be encouraged to produce videos and public service messages with positive themes about relationships, racial harmony, drug avoidance, nonviolence and conflict resolution, sexual abstinence, pregnancy prevention, and avoidance of sexually transmitted diseases.
5. Research concerning the impact music videos have on the behavior of children and adolescents should be developed.

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