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Drug-laden songs, media provide teachable moments

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine recently released the results of a study they conducted of the top 279 songs of 2005, in which they found that one in three of the songs contained references to alcohol or other drugs—most favorable. According to their findings, 80 percent of rap songs mentioned alcohol or other drug use, followed by 37 percent of country music lyrics, 20 percent of R&B hip-hop songs, 14 percent of rock songs, and 9 percent of pop songs.

Rap songs typically included references to alcohol, marijuana, or nonspecific drug use, while country songs were most likely to mention alcohol. They also found that alcohol and other drug references were commonly associated with partying, sex, violence and humor. On the other hand, only four songs on the Billboard charts that year had explicit anti-drug use messages.

While these particular researchers didn't examine whether there's a link between song content and subsequent behavior, a 2006 survey funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism found that among 1,000 community college students, rap music was consistently associated with alcohol use, potential alcohol use disorder, illicit drug use, and aggressive behavior. Alcohol and illicit drug use were also linked to listening to techno and reggae.

We also know from many other studies that young people's choices about drinking, drugging and smoking are greatly influenced by media, advertising and movie stars. For example, the RAND research group recently found that children in the sixth and seventh grades who are exposed to alcohol advertising at high levels (from television, magazines, in-store displays, and promotional items like T-shirts and posters) are 50 percent more likely to drink than children whose exposure to advertising is low.

And in 2001, Dartmouth College researchers determined that—based on the 6,000 secondary school students they surveyed—popular actors whose characters smoke in movies make smoking more desirable for the teens who view their films. Since teens generally see an average of two movies a week, are exposed to two and a half hours of music a day, and view more than 40,000 ads per year on television alone, there is reason to question how these outside forces might affect young people's choices and behaviors surrounding drugs, alcohol and tobacco use.

The studies mentioned are recent ones, but this discussion is not new. In the 1950s, Elvis Presley's famous hip thrusts, which were viewed as too obscene to be shown on television, were embraced by fans and reflected in their dances. Songs about racism, war and peace fueled the civil rights and peace movements of the '60s and '70s. And although drug references were more subtle, the music of the '60s and '70s was filled with them—especially in the genres known as acid and psychedelic rock, which referred to LSD, a popular drug of that time.

Whether songs, movies or media stars influence youth or merely reflect whatever cultural phenomena is taking place at a particular point in history, entertainment, entertainers and advertising can provide "teachable moments"—opportunities to dialogue with children about what they are seeing and who they're listening to and how these messages and messengers can affect the choices they make. Listen to their music, view television shows and movies with them, and try your best to have a respectful and non-judgmental conversation about the experience. Everyone can benefit when he or she becomes "media savvy."

When parents and caregivers take time to listen respectfully and take advantage of such teachable moments, they help hone the skills and tools that help young people grow resilient and strong—capable of making healthy and responsible choices. For information on how to start a conversation with your children, contact The Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center, 1-866-242-4111, or visit their Website, <http://www.drugfreeinfo.org>.

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