



Drug-Drenched Lyrics No Music to Parents' Ears

One-Third of Popular Songs Have References to Substance Use: Study

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"These G-Unit girls just wanna have fun

Coke and rum; got weed on the ton

I'm banging with my hand up her dress like, unh..."

So chime the lyrics of one of rapper 50 Cent's top singles in 2005. And such provocative messages, including those about alcohol and drugs, may well constitute a dominant theme in popular music.

According to new research presented today at the American Public Health Association's Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., 33 percent of the top songs off the Billboard 2005 list contained references to tobacco, alcohol and drugs such as marijuana.

And that has many parents of teenage kids worried.

"It is perhaps not a surprising statistic, but it is an alarming one," said Carl, a Georgia parent of two daughters, one 17 and one 20, who preferred that his last name be withheld. "This is again another reminder that as parents we need to spend more time listening to our children's music, because you really can't be sure what kinds of messages are getting to them."

Study author Dr. Brian Primack said that younger listeners may be more impressionable when it comes to such messages.

"This is significant because there are many impressions of substance abuse in popular music," said Primack, an assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "Since young people are exposed to a lot of popular music, they also get exposed to lots of references to substance abuse."

Lisa Merlo, assistant professor in division of addiction medicine at the University of Florida, agreed that these messages have potential to sway behaviors in younger listeners.

"The adolescent brain is not fully developed," said Merlo, who was not affiliated with the research. "Teens have a more gut level reaction and have less rational behavior in response to emotional situations. Since they tend to use music to manage their emotions, these references in music may encourage impulsive drug use."

Though rap music led the pack, with 77 percent of songs mentioning the use of illicit substances, country music came in second place, with 37 percent of the songs studied making such references.

"I suppose it goes to show that there's no safe haven here," Carl said. "You would expect country music to be a more conservative element in the musical mix."

Constant Exposure

In addition to the proportion of songs that contain such references, some say the fact that teens devote so much time to listening to this music could compound the problem.

Primack and his colleagues say that individuals between the ages of 8 and 18 are exposed to popular music 104 minutes daily, or over 12 hours each week. This means they hear 35 references of substance use per hour with the majority coming from rap.

"I don't find this surprising," said Stuart Fischhoff, a professor of psychology at California State University in Los Angeles. "Gangster music like rap is designed to be provocative and in your face."

Researchers also found that substance use in the songs was most often motivated by peer pressure and sex. Sixty-eight percent of the songs with substance use portrayed highly positive associations and consequences.

"One would hypothesize that when substance use is depicted by acceptance and sex adolescents would internalize that and think that substance abuse is an important way of getting those things," said Primack. "We think that the more positive portrayal of substance abuse, the more likely that will translate into behavioral changes."

"Lyrics with these references are a type of advertising for drugs and drug use," said Merlo. "First of all, there is a positive portrayal of the substance, either linking it to financial success, social acceptance or sexual desirability. Secondly, it is presented in a memorable form. Songs function in the same manner as a jingle you might find in commercials."

Should Parents Play DJ?

However, the researchers said that parents should not be overly alarmed. Fischhoff explained that there is no direct link between listening to music and doing drugs. Rather, the company a teen keeps could be much more important.

"The big variable in whether or not an adolescent decides to do drugs is his or her peer group," Fischhoff explained. "Children are trying to find their identity, they are less certain than adults about who they are. Peer group acceptance is extremely important. Once the group starts doing drugs, everyone has to do drugs to stay in the group."

However, there are usually one or two leaders in the group who become the role models and it's entirely possible that drug use in popular songs may cause these leaders to try the substances, he said.

"Popular songs do provide a climate of what's cool for that peer group," Fischhoff said. "If the leaders get the idea from the media that drugs are cool, others in the groups will follow their behavior."

If there is any take-home message for parents, it's to be aware of what their children are listening to -- and if necessary, to intervene.

Carl said that he and his wife block certain channels on their digital radio service, and when their daughters were younger they would screen their daughters' mp3 players, deleting songs that they found objectionable.

"I think parents need to be involved in what their children listen to," he said.

Dan Childs contributed to this report.

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