A Case for Your Weed Smokin’, Pill Poppin’ Gangsta Kids

Sex, drugs, and rock and roll have always been a hard pill for parents to swallow. However, many parents do, in fact, swallow other pills or gulp cabernet while MTV babysits, because it is easier to blame the music than to face the music. Some people today are blaming society’s ills on rap and hip-hop music. I do not believe that rap or hip hop advocates drug use or violence. I believe that rap and hip hop are a response to what drug abuse and violence have done to society. Where did this blaming all begin? Will your kids get wasted off of “purple drank” because of Lil’ Wayne? Is little Johnny going to “grab his Glock” or “stray strapped” because Tupac told him to? Will your children become big drug kingpins and traffickers because of Rick Ross? All these scenarios are conceivably possible, but are unlikely to happen due to kids listening to rap and hip-hop music. Hip hop and rap does not advocate for kids to use drugs or violence. While some lyrics do contain references to drugs and violence it is up to the child’s guardian to set a responsible example of life for their children. If a young person does use rap and hip hop to guide decision making processes or measure their success in life it is the parents or society that have failed him or her, not the music industry. Although I stand firm in my statement, I do not believe that all hip hop and rap today is intelligent or even makes sense. If everyone was allowed to make up words to rhyme with actual words used in the English dictionary, like Lil’ Wayne, we could all be rappers. Although the music industry is perceived of as failing us, parents and society must not.

Parents have always been frightened that current music will influence their children to use drugs and alcohol. It cannot be denied that one will hear references to Hennessey, Patron, Courvoisier, and Cristal while listening to some current music. Artists such as Busta Rhymes, 50 Cent, and Tupac Shakur have lyrics containing alcoholic beverages and there usage. Rappers Jay-Z and Dr. Dre have promoted Coors Light; Nelly has endorsed Courvoisier; and Remy Martin sponsored one of Usher’s birthday parties (Herd). In fact, in a study by Denise Herd, she found that from 1979 to 1997, “there were significant increases in references to alcohol to signify glamour and wealth, and using alcohol with drugs and for recreational purposes. The findings also showed that alcohol use in rap music were much more likely to result in positive than negative consequences” (1). In other words, artists were increasingly rapping about the prestige and allure of expensive liquor which would bring about parties. The lyrics were mainly focusing on the beneficial effects of being intoxicated instead of the harmful effects.

Parties and “Partying Like a Rock Star”, a song by a group call the Shop Boys, has been mentioned many times in music. While there are some lyrics glamorizing partying and drug use, such as Wacka Flocka’s song “Grove St. Party”, “My partner on a pill, my other partner drunk, rollin’ a lot I'm trying to get fucked up” (Malphurs), there are also lyrics warning against the implications of drug use such as Outkast’s song “Git Up, Git Out”:

“Get high but I don't get too high.

So what's the limit 'posed to be?

That must be why you can't get your ass up out the bed before three.

You need to git up, git out, cut that bullshit out.

Ain't you sick and tired of having to do without” (OutKast, Gibb, and Callaway).

And although some thought that Afroman’s song “Because I Got High” was humorous and I believe it belongs in many genres of music, it outlined serious complications of getting high which included: failing out of school, being fired from a job, missing child support payments, becoming a paraplegic in a car accident, getting cars towed, and messing up one’s whole life, all because of getting high (Foreman).

I believe the chances that a young person is going to get high from listening to rap and hip hop are low because listening to music is not going to influence a child’s behavior as much as other factor’s in a child’s life. If an adolescent does indeed make choices based on music he or she has heard there are factors that preceded that choice, such as society or family. The family a child grows up in plays a significant role in how a child learns and grows, his or her behavior patterns, and subsequent drug use (Taylor). Also, a study done by The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which was quoted by Ozietta Taylor, found that “8.3 million children under 18 years of age (11.9%) lived with at least one parent who was dependent on or abused alcohol or an illicit drug during the past year” (606-607). Many children are living with dysfunctional, drug and alcohol abusing guardians that are supposed to be setting lifelong examples for their children. Furthermore, a website called Focus on the Family indicated that, “Children learn what they live. Smoking, drinking and other drug-related behaviors among parents will usually be duplicated in their children” (Why Kids Use Drugs). This being said, I believe a kid is more likely to use or abuse drugs because of the family environment; children perceive what is normal from their family environment, not from anything they hear on the radio. A child that is given guidance and direction from a guardian will not abuse drugs and alcohol.

Artists in the hip hop and rap genre may use their lyrics to express feelings they have toward situations at home or life in general much like one would use a journal or diary. I believe that artists need to express his or her feelings about the well-being of the community. Artists are not responsible for what is happening; they are talking about what is wrong with society. An artist who is musically talented has the luxury of writing lyrics, instead of sentences, in a journal. I mean, has anyone not heard about Eminem’s volatile relationship with his ex-wife or mother in his lyrics? A young adult can relate to situations that Eminem talks about when he or she is not able to verbalize it themselves.

Considerable news coverage has been in the public’s eye about rappers and their drug use. An article by James Gilbert reported that Lil Wayne was arrested in 2008 for four ounces of marijuana, an ounce of cocaine, and 41 grams of ecstasy (Yumasun.com). Rapper T.I. was arrested for drug along with his wife; he is again in prison for violating parole stemming from gun charges. While some artists cannot break the cycle of drug use and abuse that is prevalent in life and pervasive in the news, some have reached a bottom with their addictions and have decided to change their ways. For example, rapper Eminem is in recovery from a very serious addiction from prescription pill abuse. I would think that parents would hold him up as a role model. The 12 Step model of recovery in based on attraction rather than promotion, and having a role model such as Eminem to look up to would be an excellent choice for kids that are struggling. He is a symbol of second chances for adolescent that have gone through the same sort of life events he has gone through. Through his lyrics, which talk about home life, loss of friends, loss of hope, and his love of his daughter he is able to express himself in ways that some teenagers are not able to do. These are not easy issues for teenagers to talk about and through music he or she is able to relate and relay their feelings. A very close friend of mine is able to talk about her struggle and triumph over prescription pill addiction more accurately because of Eminem’s album The Relapse.

Besides drugs, mention of violence is often complained about in rap and hip hop music. Some people may see the portrayal of graphic lyrics as a way for youth people to incite violence. One study was conducted by Harvard Medical School. One of the researchers, Michael Rich said, “Our findings raise concern for the effect of violent portrayals in music videos on adolescents' expectations about their own safety and the way they view people of another gender or race” (Cromie Jr.). Basically, Michael Rich and his colleagues believe that young people will use the tactics described by artists in songs as conflict resolution techniques. When it comes to the topic of rap and hip hop, most of us will readily agree that some songs contain references to guns and violent events. One song in particular that is violent in nature is Tupac Shakur’s “Hit ‘Em Up”. The song details murdering his rivals: Notorious B.I.G., Junior Mafia, and employees at Bad Boy Records. It also talks about several different types of guns and boasts about having sex with Notorious B.I.G.’s wife. This is disturbing, but one has to wonder what is behind all this violence. Violence doesn’t happen overnight and Shakur was often rapping about the problems that led to the violence.

Tupac Shakur was often talking about the social problems that led up to violence. Although Shakur has been dead for 15 years these problems still saturate our streets. He also still influences culture evidence by his induction into the Library of Congress for his song “Dear Mama” in 2009 (Associated Press). In addition to that, rappers Meek Mill and Rick Ross wrote a song, that pays homage to Shakur, called “Tupac Back”. Wacka Flocka named his album Flockaveli which is a play on words to Shakur’s pseudonym and album title which was Makaveli. Shakur adopted the name Makaveli because of the political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli. In particular Shakur’s song, “Never B Peace”, best exemplify several aspects of social problems that lead up to many issues that face young people back then and today:

“On the strength till my niggas get a piece

We can’t have peace

How the fuck we gonna live happy if we ain't got none?

You motherfuckers is smiling, but I'm mean mugging

Why? Cause gotta be thugging

I've seen drugs done turned this motherfucking hood out

All us niggas acting up

Wild ass motherfucking adolescents

These niggas ain't even got no childhoods no more

How the fuck can you have a childhood and you have a funeral every motherfucking weekend

And you motherfuckers talking about peace?

Nigga, it ain't no motherfucking peace

You ain't seen the news motherfucker?

You ain't heard?

Little babies getting smoked

Motherfuckers killing there whole family

'Lil kids getting thrown off buildings

Motherfuckers gettin abused

Peace? Niggas you out your motherfucking mind?

Fuck peace

We can't never have peace, till you motherfuckers clean up this mess you made

'Till u fucking clean up the dirt u dropped

'Till we get a piece” (Shakur, Never B Peace).

Shakur’s point in this song and in many of his other songs is that there are many elements in life that are disregarded by many people. He asserts that children are being abused, drugs have invaded neighbors, funerals are virulent, and childhood is not possible in these types of environments. In making these lyrical comments, Shakur tells us that we will never have peace until something changes in society. This change in society will happen with or without rap and hip hop music though. Children that do commit violent acts have society to blame, not rap and hip hop lyrics. Young people that are not stimulated in school or are left behind, have no opportunity for a job, or have parents that don’t care will have to rely on the system for help. When no assistance is provided a young person may fall into a trap of hopelessness where they are more likely to become violent to survive or become a victim of a cycle of violence.

An antiviolence group called Youth Together found three root causes of violence after conducting a survey of 1200 students in the East Oakland area. The three causes were, “inadequate educational resources, insufficient employment opportunities, and a lack of things to do” (Tilton, 386). The solution to the problem in East Oakland was to create a community center that was created and run by adolescents with adults retaining control over the funds. And instead of denying that hip hop and rap was part of the youth culture they emphasized it. Youth Uprising, which is what the community center was called, built a performing arts centers and “works hard to stay on the cutting edge of local hip-hop cultures, cultivating close relationships with artists like E-40, Little John, Too Short, and Mistah F.A.B., and hosting *Vibe Magazine* and music video shoots at the center” (389). So in some ways hip hop and rap is used to make life better for young children, not take away from life. There is no need to isolate and alienate a child further by disregarding his or her music choice. Sometimes that is one of the only things that a young person can relate to. Merging all these elements of youth culture together, like Youth Uprising did, brought kids together for much needed work including community service and charity work. Because of Youth Uprising’s help children were no longer left with the “three causes” of violence.

The way that some rappers are portrayed are as violent thugs that take what he or she wants and leaves a cloud of misery behind him or her, forgetting the past that he or she often raps about. But that is not true; a lot of the artists with the most “disturbing” lyrics have their own charities that give back to the community that he or she was brought up in. According to the website Look to the Stars, 50 Cent has his own charity called the G-Unit Foundation which helps low-income communities (50 Cent's Charity Work, Events, and Causes). Snoop Dogg participates in many charities and started his own youth football league which keeps “kids active while helping them learn team building and leadership” (Snoop Youth Football League). But not all children get to participate in these activities so a guardian or society is an adolescent’s first line of defense against violence and drugs.

Children are not going to be able to pull themselves out of the environments that are indicative of violence and drugs. This is where society and family come in. In a 2009 speech President Obama told parents, “they must accept their own responsibilities by putting away the Xbox and putting our kids to bed at a reasonable hour” (Stolberg). While the crowd he was addressing was majority African American, this applies to all parents. At the speech he addressed societal problems that lead to children engaging in high risk behavior but he also said these were not excuses; he was once in their position. President Obama called on parents because, “our kids can’t all aspire to be LeBron or Lil Wayne. I want them aspiring to be scientists and engineers, doctors and teachers, not just ballers and rappers. I want them aspiring to be a Supreme Court justice. I want them aspiring to be president of the United States of America” (Stolberg). President Obama’s point is that with responsible parenting, limit setting, and guidance children can flourish.

Barrack Obama’s message is also echoed in a song called “I Can” by the rapper Nas. In the song, Nas articulates to young people a similar message that Obama said in his speech:

“Be, B-Boys and girls, listen up   
You can be anything in the world, in God we trust  
An architect, doctor, maybe an actress   
But nothing comes easy it takes much practice” (Bin Olu Dara Jones).

I think that the meaning of both Obama’s speech and Nas’s song reiterates my point. With strong guidance children will be able to grow up and become people that contribute to society, not gun toting, drug addicted felons that is often feared when a kid listens to rap and hip hop music.

The guidance that children need is from parents and the community. Whether that is from the family community or society as a community, kids need help to grow up. Children will not make bad choices based on rap or hip hop lyrics because he or she hears them on the radio. A child will make wrong decisions because of the circumstances that he or she lives in. Rap and hip hop music have often been scapegoats for perceived problems in juvenile delinquency. Parents and society need to stop blaming outside influences for their inadequacies. Until parents and the community step up and face the facts that something is inherently wrong with the way we raise our kids nothing will change. The cycle will just continue when our children have children. This will not happen overnight and will take major changes on everyone’s part, but I think it may be best describe by a rapper:

“We gotta make a change...

It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes.

Let's change the way we eat,

Let's change the way we live

And let's change the way we treat each other.

You see the old way wasn't working so it's on us to do

What we gotta do…” (Shakur, Changes).

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