

Common Sense on Music and Your Kids

Now's a great time to tune in

Almost nothing comes between kids and their music. But music has really changed. Know what your kids are listening to, and listen along with them. After all, music is expression — good or bad — and your being open to it goes a long way with your kids.

Some facts

U.S. teenagers are increasingly turning to free alternatives like Pandora.com and MySpace.com instead of buying music (*NPD Group, 2009*).

92% of students own some kind of media player — for 86% of them, it's an iPod (*Piper Jaffray, 2009*).

93% of teens who buy their digital music legally use iTunes (*Piper Jaffray, 2009*).

72% of children were able to purchase music with “explicit content” labels without parents (*FTC, 2009*).

66% of preteens have downloaded music after hearing it on a TV show (*Pangea Media and Ypulse, 2009*).

What is digital music?

Downloads, videos, MP3s, iPods, YouTube, and live streaming. Most of our kids' music now comes via the Internet. Social networks like MySpace launch artists, and kids link to artists' pages and download songs to their own pages. Videos appear for free or are available to download. Entire careers have been launched on the strength of an amateur musician's YouTube video. And kids can use music services like Rhapsody or Pandora to stream songs they like.

Music still gets swapped with friends. Most middle school kids know how to burn a CD, download music, and use file-sharing software (legal and illegal), all of which often bypasses parents completely.

Music is central to games like Guitar Hero and Rock Band. And software that allows kids to create and compose their own tunes is increasingly affordable, encouraging creativity and expression.

Why it matters

Music is a powerful medium. It can help quieter kids reveal things they normally can't. It can express emotions turbulent adolescents may not be able to voice. It's also at the center of many social interactions and popular culture movements.

Studies have repeatedly shown that kids are impacted by the music they listen to. Given the power of music and its potent messages, parents need to decide what their kids are ready for — and help them decode what they hear.

Music with explicit content is labeled online, but it's still available. Sometimes what kids listen to is age appropriate, but even those songs can feature racy or violent lyrics and can glorify drinking, drug use, or violent behavior.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **Be a model for tame music.** Your child will sing along with whatever you select, so make sure you choose songs with lyrics you won't mind your child repeating if you aren't around.
- » **Hold off on the iPods and MP3 players.** Do you really want to hand your child an expensive gadget that could get left somewhere or go through the laundry? If your children want to listen to music in the car, give them your MP3 player.
- » **Play your favorite music for kids and enjoy together.** It's surprising how much kids enjoy listening to vintage tunes. Why not share your oldies but goodies and start them off with the classics?

Parent tips for middle and high school kids

- » **Do your homework before your kids buy CDs or downloaded music.** Read some reviews — including those on the Common Sense Media's music channel — or take a look at the lyrics on sites like lyricsdepot.com or sing365.com.
- » **Make some downloading rules.** Make sure you agree on what kind of music your children can download. Sites like iTunes allow you to create an allowance for your kids so they can purchase at will — but remember, if you do this, they are buying without your oversight. If you do decide to create an allowance, check which songs and videos have been downloaded — and let your kids know that you will check their downloads. (Under the "view" section of your online music store, you can click the "date added" box to instantly check for any new song or video.) If the content is explicit, you'll know right away because it says so on the display.
- » **Discourage stealing music.** In addition to legitimate ways to buy music online, there are lots of programs that let kids get it for free. Remind your children that it's wrong to steal music — after all, don't they want their favorite artists to get paid for their work? Also, many of these music-stealing programs can open up your computer to viruses and malware.
- » **Enjoy music with your teens.** Mortify your kids by playing Guitar Hero with them. Ask your son to plug in his iPod on the next family road trip, or have your daughter burn you a CD of her music for your car. Not only will you get a better idea of what they're being exposed to, but you may also improve your relationship with them. When you show interest in their world, they might be more open to hearing your opinions.
- » **Discuss music messages.** If you don't like a message, try to open a discussion with your child without being too judgmental — nothing will make a kid defensive faster than a judgmental parent. It's important that children can challenge what they hear in a song, but they won't be likely to do it if they think you hate all their music.
- » **Ask questions.** Don't let music just wash over your kids. Instead, teach them to be critical of music's messages. For ideas, look at Common Sense Media reviews. Each one comes with a Common Sense Note, which provides parents with ideas about how to talk to their kids about music.

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