

Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n Roll: Part III – Rock 'n Roll

By Marvin W Berkowitz, PhD

This is the last of a three-part series of articles in which I revisit the mantra of my adolescence, "Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll." In the first two columns I explored sex and drugs and how dealing with them properly in the family can help build a child's character. Now we turn to rock 'n roll, still one of my great passions. (If I could have been anything I wanted to be in life, I would have chosen either to front a great rock band or to be a member of Monty Python's Flying Circus.)

Depending upon one's point of view, rock 'n roll (I use the term broadly here to include all of its many facets including classic rock, new wave, punk, ska, grunge, heavy metal, bubblegum, etc.) is either the liberating anthem of youth or an evil tool used by kids to punish their parents. Either it allows kids to express the deep and confusing pains of being adolescent, or it's high-decibel auditory torture specifically designed to target frazzled parental nerves.

Regardless of one's point of view however, it is clear that rock 'n roll is at the heart of many parent/child conflicts. So let's take a closer look at the issue.

Parent: "That music is too loud! How many times do I have to tell you to TURN IT DOWN?"

Child: "Whaaat?"

Parent: "Your music is garbage. And do you call that singing? It sounds more like a warthog in a meat grinder!"

Child: "Whaaat?"

Parent: "Do you realize what they're singing about? They are saying it's fun to kill people. Do you agree with that?"

Child: "Whaaaat?"

There are three very different issues here. The first, loudness, affects everyone within earshot so that needs to be negotiated. Perhaps your son can use headphones. Or maybe he'll agree to turn down the volume, close the door to his room, or both. Another solution might be for him to listen to his music at full volume only when you're not within range (like within the same city). It's also important to address a very real health-related concern: It has been scientifically proven that exposure to high decibel sounds causes permanent hearing damage and, in some cases, hearing loss.

Page 1 of 3

Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n Roll:

Part III – Rock 'n Roll

The second issue—whether his music is garbage or not—is a matter of aesthetics and is best left alone. If your child likes the music, fine. After all, we listened to Bob Dylan and Neil Young and neither of them will ever be mistaken for Pavarotti. And the same goes for many other widely accepted mainstream musicians. Dismissing what kids like is not good policy and should be done only when there are issues of concern that relate to moral values or potential harm. After all, you'll have enough disagreements with your child without adding unnecessarily to the list.

But the third issue—that of moral unacceptability—is an extremely important one that relates directly to character building.

As we all know, adolescents need to establish a sub-culture in order to show they are not like their parents. They want to announce to their world that they have their own values, tastes and lifestyle and that theirs are different from those of their parents'. And rock 'n roll is a great tool for proving that. It's all about rebellion against the dominant adult culture. However, one of the real challenges that today's kids face has to do with the fact that their parents grew up on rock 'n roll as well, so the kids have to stretch all the more to make their music unique.

We have an unusual problem in our household: I like many current groups such as U2, Smashing Pumpkins, Reel Big Fish, etc., so it turns out that my son and I often enjoy the same music. And as might be expected, he has to stretch further to create disagreements over music. (Luckily for him, there is Rap!) Real problems arise, however, when music contains antisocial messages, messages that promote racism or sexism, or encourage self-harm.

Those who follow this column won't be surprised to hear me say that this is yet another opportunity to talk about important issues. Be sure not to just rant, however. And handle the issue carefully when choosing what you want to ban from your household. Make certain to explain why you're bothered or offended because believe it or not, kids are often unaware of exactly what you object to. Tell your kid what's wrong with a lyric's message. Don't overlook the band as a whole and the musicians individually and what they stand for, either.

When my son was about 9, we jointly discovered a group that remains popular to this day. We both liked their music so we bought their recording. Shortly thereafter, I read an article that told how the musicians had been linked to the white supremacist movement so I told my son what I had learned and why he could no longer play the group's music in our home.

Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n Roll:

Part III – Rock 'n Roll

It would be putting it mildly to say that he was unhappy about my decision. But dealing with the issue helped us explore the subject of bigotry and whether listening to such groups has the potential to affect one's values and development. (One particularly interesting argument had to do with whether just listening to it might be considered less offensive than owning it. The jury's still out on that.)

Parents must also be sensitive to their children's developmental level. For example, what may be appropriate for a child age fourteen might well be unacceptable for a child of nine. When my son was younger and more impressionable, I was much more vigilant about language contained in the lyrics of the music he chose. Now that he's older I don't feel the language is quite as treacherous to his character formation. I do want to make it clear, however, that I am still concerned about music's messages and the overall effect they have on children.

Thanks to the Internet (I never thought I would say that in a column about parenting kids for character!), we can deal with this quite efficiently. When my son wants to buy a new CD I ask him to download and print the lyrics for me. Then I read them while he paces anxiously, waiting to see if I will discover some unsavory ideas. If I don't, he can buy the recording. If I do, then we discuss what the words mean and whether our family has an issue with the message.

So, don't think of today's rock 'n roll as the devil's noise. Most of it's just fine even if we parents don't get it. In fact, at least some of it promotes acceptable values and concepts. Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul and Mary fame) has taught me that music is a marvelous tool for getting people to address a variety of important issues. His current project (**Don't Laugh at Me; www.dontlaugh.org**) utilizes music to fight hatred and violence in schools. And when music really is bad, that's also presents an opportunity to discuss character—or the lack thereof. You're likely to find that such discussions will strengthen the relationship between you and your child.

And of course as always, all issues between parent and child need to be dealt with respectfully and responsibly, and with mutual love and care.