



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Ask Pact Hip Hop

Q:

My son is drawn to many of the rap artists & 50 Cent is one of the worst. I'm not easily shocked but his lyrics are so incredibly offensive! He is far too self absorbed to care about the effect his music has on black youth. I don't want my children to be part of this culture but they say I don't understand. Should parents let their children listen to hip hop?

A:

As a parent, you should begin by understanding the appeal of something prior to rejecting it out of hand or you risk losing your child's confidence that you are willing and able to understand his experience. Keeping communication open and honest is critical to being one of the guiding influences in a child's life as they enter adolescence. If adults reject completely the culture and music that kids like, they risk being relegated to the outer edges of the child's influence sphere and losing the opportunity to be part of the conversation that shapes the child's thinking about what it means to be young and of color in America today.

Hip hop culture and rap specifically provoke strong reactions among many and most particularly those of us who are no longer members of the youth generation. Rap music is often characterized as dangerous and the source of negative goals and imagery within the African American community. As scholars such as Maureen Mahon have noted, hip hop arose at a time when powerful forces of deprivation were battering the black community in the late 70s and early 80s - music education programs were being shut down; the black unemployment rates skyrocketed to nearly 22% (1983); and the crack epidemic was raging, contributing to gang violence and the subsequent imprisonment of a large percentage of black males. Hip hop spoke to these issues, and became inextricably linked with "black

authenticity," which is itself constructed around the working and lower class aesthetics and aspirations.

Many in the black, white and other racial communities agree that there are problems with today's hip hop. Black women are speaking out, calling for hip hop artists to reject the current demeaning portrayal of Black women, and reclaim the genre's roots. Essence Magazine recently published a series of articles on the issue of how women are portrayed in hip hop music (see the February 2006 issue of the magazine). In a May, 2005 article for the New York Times, Brent Staples wrote,

"African-American teenagers are beset on all sides by dangerous myths about race. The most poisonous one defines middle-class normalcy and achievement as "white," while embracing violence, illiteracy and drug dealing as "authentically" black. This fiction rears its head ... in rap music, which started out with a broad palette of themes but has increasingly evolved into a medium for worshiping misogyny, materialism and murder."

The brand that is currently being promoted by the mainstream white-dominated music advertising world too often fits this violent and mysogenic mold. But don't we also need to consider whether hip hop in general gets an unfair share of criticism. Couldn't we

find the exact same problems of misogyny, materialism, and general buffoonery in good old-fashioned rock and roll – certainly our parents did! And these criticisms of hip hop always overlook the fact that what you hear on mainstream radio does not represent all of hip hop – nor does it acknowledge the positive legacy of social criticism and value that some rap artists are embracing. Cynthia Gordy wrote in Essence Magazine

“After 25 years, we still love hip-hop music. It’s that classic boom-bap sound of the Golden Era. It’s the lyrics that can entertain, portray street grit or teach us about ourselves.”

Hip hop is not all street violence and gangsta’s. Artists rap about love, politics, self-exploration, and just plain dance ‘til you drop fun. As a parent, you might try educating yourself about the depth and breadth of the genre by listening to artists such as Common, Talib Kweli, the Roots, KOS, and Kanye West. Your son may argue that those artists aren’t “real” because they aren’t gangsta rappers. Your job as a parent is to help him see that “real” Black folks can’t be so narrowly defined. By engaging with some of his favorite artists you can demonstrate a willingness to understand what he responds to in their music while having conversations about the values that are embodied within.

In fact, one of the members of the seminal rap group Run-DMC, Daryl McDaniels (DMC), is himself adopted and recently completed a documentary for VH-1 about his reunion with his birth mother. A man who wants to serve as a role model for Black youth as well as adopted youth, he hopes that other adoptees or children in foster care can identify with him and know that they are not alone — certainly an admirable message that might serve as a starting point for you and your son to discuss this controversial topic.

Perhaps we can learn from Professor Michael Eric Dyson who believes that hip hop culture should not be ignored nor rejected because some of it reflects the frustration of Black America as it struggles with pervasive poverty. “The complex identities of blacks are expressed in forms as wide-ranging as the preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr., the gangsta’ rap of Snoop Doggy Dogg, and the writing of James Baldwin...” By speaking the language of the church, the academy, and popular culture, Dyson tries to promote communication. “I believe that all segments of black culture can learn from the others, and from the larger world,” he says. “Our best future will only be realized if we learn to listen and to speak to one another, and to those outside our culture.”