Guiding the Influence of Hip-Hop Music on Middle-School Students' Feelings, Thinking, and Behaving

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Abstract
Although the nature of the relationship of music on students' emotional development remains an issue for continued research, my overall purpose is to provide adults with research-based methods to help children become better consumers of hip-hop music. First, I identify research-based recommendations to prepare adults as facilitators of children's developing pro-social behaviors. Second, I provide techniques that adults could use to help children interpret and analyze characters in popular lyrics within pro-social behavioral guidelines. Finally, partly based on findings from a national middle-school student focus group questionnaire, I offer a plan for easy-to-implement activities adults could utilize to help children assess and appreciate the feelings of characters described in popular musical lyrics.

Introduction
In recent years, adults have expressed concerns about the impact they believe popular hip-hop music has on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of young adolescents. Adolescents' attitudes about school, material success, appreciation of themselves and others seem to be shaped to a large extent by the music they listen to. Similarly youths' behavior, as reflected in their clothing styles, language usage, desire for jewelry, and automobile preferences, have been attributed to lyrics and videos from the hip-hop industry. Beyonce sings Crazy in Love and her video has teens (and Oprah) dancing the "Beyonce," Lloyd Banks' I'm So Fly reminds listeners of his appreciation for material possessions, Mannie Fresh raps (the act of saying rhymes to the actual beat of the music) (Robert, 2004) that everything should be Real Big and children want to wear big clothing and jewelry, and want to drive big cars. Whenever the Franchise Boys sing about bangin' in White Tees there is a sudden surge in sales of white tee-shirts. Clearly, adults should have some degree of concern about children's perception of popular musical lyrics, but what do children think about the impact music has on their psychological well-being? What role do adolescents think educators and parents play in helping them sort through and make meaning of popular hip-hop music? Do children have a clear understanding about the commercial aspects of the music industry and how that industry targets them for marketing? Are there techniques that caring adults can use to help children develop pro-social behavioral skills through hip-hop musical lyrics?

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I had these and other questions in mind when I recently met with over 300 middle school students in focus groups, and then separately with parents, educators, and other concerned adults from cities across the country. The main purpose of these meetings was to gain first-hand insights into adolescents’ thinking about the music they listened to. Generally, I wanted them to tell me whether they believed music had an impact on their thinking and behaving, and on their self-perception as it related to their favorite music, and to what extent they thought adults such as teachers, school counselors, parents, and community leaders should be involved in their decision-making about the music they listened to. Specifically, the students were asked to complete a 13-response “discussion-stimulating” questionnaire intended to elicit students’ honest thoughts about four central themes: (a) how their favorite music impacted their thoughts and behavior; (b) the roles of adults in advising them about their music choices; (c) ways adults could use music to open avenues for honest communication between them; and, (d) the importance of trust relationships with key adults. It was in the framework of these focus group sessions and the Middle School Student Music Preference Questionnaire (MSSMPQ) that student participants responded openly to my inquiries.

Based on student responses to the questionnaire, follow-up discussions with middle school administrators, counselors, teachers, parents and other adults, along with numerous informal and formal workshop settings, findings reported herein will be presented with references to three complementary lines of research: (a) the inherent motivational nature of music; (b) successful marketing strategies of the music industry to attract adolescents’ purchasing power; and (c) parallel strategies adults involved in the lives of middle school children can take from the music industry in order to help them improve children’s pro-social behaviors while they open meaningful avenues of communication. I will begin with a discussion of how music may have a natural motivational influence on listeners’ emotions and explain how marketing efforts by some in the music industry capture the attention and trust of their young audiences in order to increase their marketing base. Next, I will briefly describe a research-based pro-social development strategy that adults can implement with young adolescents. Furthermore, I will describe parallels between media marketing strategies to connect with children’s thinking and behaving and tenets of pro-social behavior and then make recommendations for constructive mediation. Finally, I will describe a model for pro-social development that can be implemented within the classroom setting, counseling situations, and at home. My suggested model may help adults enhance adolescents’ appreciation for the music they listen to and open honest communication between caring adults and children.

Music and Human Emotions

It is one of the inherent qualities of music to have a powerfully stimulating effect on the mental and/or emotional state of a listener. The basic nature of music is not limited to entertainment; people listen to music to fulfill both psychological and physical needs (Mickel & Mickel, 2002). Music has the power to move the listener toward an alternate reality. Harmonious musical beats accompanied by emotive lyrics can almost create an inviting escape to an abstract paradise of the listener’s choice. As one anonymous hip-hop music producer stated, “music is a form of therapy that can help people cope with emotional difficulties and it also gives us a temporary uplift from the normal hum-drum realities of day-to-day living.” On the one hand, music can take a listener to a distant past memory while on the other hand music can stimulate a listener to entertain ideas of whatever unrealized fantasies she or he may prefer.
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Although young people are interested in various types of music, the continuous growth in popularity of hip-hop music demonstrates their preference. Mickel and Mickel (2002) reported that between the 7th and 12th grades, the average American teenager will listen to 10,500 hours of rock or rap music. Add to that fact the recent increase in demand for continuous music offered through such technological advances as iPod and MP3 players, and the available amount of entertainment is even more amazing. The enormous amount of time that teenagers engage their attention to music is almost equivalent to the number of hours spent in the classroom from kindergarten through high school (Mickel & Mickel, 2002).

It is the exotic beat of hip-hop music as well as the often unintelligible lyrics that seem to be quite appealing to young people and mystifying to most adults. Some of the music that children enjoy listening to has consistently been the focus of concern and even discontentment for many adults. Well meaning adults have often complained that the popular music of today seems to have a detrimental effect on children’s thought and subsequent behavioral patterns. Particularly, many adults believe that the lyrics of some celebrated musical artists such as Fifty-Cent, Nelly, Foxy Brown, Marilyn Manson, Lil’ Kim, and Eminem have often undercut the very attributes, skills, and values of emotional intelligence that form the basis for pro-social behavior. According to Goleman (1997), emotional intelligence includes such attributes as self-awareness, impulse control, persistence, zeal, and self-motivation. Children who develop emotional intelligence are often able to demonstrate the necessary pro-social, self-regulatory, and self management skills for successful adjustment into responsible adulthood (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Salovey & Sloyter, 1997).

In contrast, children who lack pro-social skills associated with stable emotional intelligence tend to be easily influenced by various environmental factors such as peers and media. Some adults believe that this emotional weakness in children may leave them vulnerable to ideas of violence, sexual promiscuity, and other forms of anti-social behavior that are often portrayed in some popular hip-hop songs and videos. For example, in an attempt to gain some sense of understanding about the motives for the perpetrators of the Columbine High School massacre, some concerned adults have attributed the violent behavior of the students to the rock musical lyrics expressed by Marilyn Manson. Although somewhat dismayed by the severity of the Columbine tragedy, these adults described Manson’s musical lyrics as violently explicit and believed that those lyrics could have somehow provoked the emotionally vulnerable students to think about, elaborately plan, and carry out their massacre on Columbine High School.

Of course, Manson has continuously denied any direct or indirect involvement in that tragedy and has expressed sympathy for those affected by the incident (Glasgow, 1999). Manson has also stressed the importance of mature adult guidance in children’s decisions about the type of musical entertainment they engage in. In this case, Manson’s musical lyrics were believed to have had powerful adverse effects on how these children expressed their feelings of anger, hostility, rage, and despair against fellow students and other members of the school-community body. In other words, adults in this example attributed Manson’s musical lyrics as the primary cause for the children’s insensitivity to other people’s feelings and well being (Hammond, 1999).

Music Industry’s Marketing Strategies and Children

Even though it is the primary responsibility of parents to equip their children with nurturing home environments that continuously stimulate pro-social emotional development, there are those occasions when some parents and other concerned adults allow external factors such as
the music industry to capitalize on parental "laissez-faire" attitudes. Some in the popular music industry (e.g. artists, producers, label executives, and other "behind-the-scenes" operators) have continuously stressed the important role of adults as mediators between children and the music they listen to. In a conversation with one popular hip-hop artist (who has expressed his desire to remain anonymous), one theme came across repeatedly, "...it is the responsibility of parents and other adults to make efforts to explain to children that music is primarily entertainment, a temporary vehicle of escape from reality." Furthermore, a lot of what becomes known as popular hit music is conceptualized and developed in terms of its market appeal to young people. In his words, "most of what children hear in music and see on the music videos is not real." What, then, is it about this temporary entertainment that grasps children's attention and causes adults to debunk its existence?

Based on sound learning theory, educators are well aware that messages requiring the engagement of multiple senses that identify with a listener on an emotional level—e.g., her or his desires, passions, likes, dislikes—tend to attract and hold the attention of an audience. As researchers at Nickelodeon have expressed, effective marketing plans that capture children's attention must simultaneously: (a) speak to kids in a voice which acknowledges their sophistication, (b) identify and strike an emotional chord, (c) allow kids to participate and make them want to, (d) promote strategies and products that can co-exist in kids' public and private lives, and (e) recognize that kids are generally optimistic and expect messages that are optimistic (see Williams, 2000). When children actively attend to carefully designed external stimuli the messages conveyed are incorporated into specific conceptual categories that guide their thought processes. Once this cognitive connection is secured, messages have the potential to become an ingredient of their consciousness as well as an available feature of their behavioral response repertoire. Although it is the intent of marketing strategists to create commercial messages that stimulate an interest in their products that would impact an audience's purchasing behavior, the information contained in these commercial messages often runs counter with the type of pro-social skills that parents, educators, and other adults say they value.

Adults' lack of influence in guiding children's musical preferences creates an opportunity for conflicts and confusion about children's developing social values. These ambiguities often serve to create a "communication gap" between the pro-social skills that well-meaning adults intend to convey to children and children's unguided attention to and inappropriate interpretation of musical lyrics. This "gap" in communication between adults' intentions and children's attention leaves an opened avenue that the music industry has found to be an appealing commercial opportunity.

It is the common belief of most media executives that they provide a form of entertainment that must be commercially lucrative in order for their particular business enterprises to survive. In most cases, their primary concern is not just the satisfaction of demands of their young audiences, but also their company's bottom line. Todd Gitlin's (2002) Media Unlimited reported a conversation with CBS's vice president for research who told Gitlin that, "I'm not interested in culture. I'm not interested in pro-social values. I have only one interest. That's whether people watch the program. That's my definition of good, that's my definition of bad" (p. 204). Such media executive decision makers allocate billions of dollars each year to ensure the marketability of their products. Continuous research projects, including hundreds of national focus groups, weekly tracking studies, trend-setter research polls, and weekly music testing provide cutting-edge empirical data to music industry leaders from their intended audience that helps chart the direction of their marketing course.
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One such entertainment organization, MTV, regularly conducts extensive product feasibility studies that not only provide pertinent demographic data about the audiences they appeal to, but also gather extensive data about special techniques devised to encourage young people to support their products. Interestingly, the MTV mission statement is "to connect with our audience in a way that fuels their passion for music and challenges their thinking with the kind of fresh, relevant, risk-taking entertainment found nowhere else" (MTV Music Television, 2002, p. 12). This mission seems to be founded in the tenets of sympathetic and empathetic behavior—that is, being in close "connection" with the feeling and thinking nature of the audience in order to identify their particular needs and desires, and then guiding the audience's thinking toward some intended end—in MTV's case, maintaining a strong consumer-provider relationship.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of this connection, one of the key principles that this organization has expressed in its approach to young people is the importance of demonstrating respect and recognition for its audience. Their philosophy is based on the theme of "…respect [for] their [young people's] intelligence, knowledge, and ability," and most importantly, MTV executives realize that in order to continue to have a long-term marketing influence over their young audience's purchasing decisions, their organization must "…[put] the viewer in charge—showcase them, respect them, represent them, give them a voice, access and impact…Who are we? We are our audience" (MTV Music Television, 2002. p. 11). The business savvy MTV executives have executed an excellent strategy to fill the communication gap and to connect with the desires of young people. This strategy is based on the idea that "it's about how you fit into their world, not how they fit into your brand." (MTV Music Television, 2002, p. 11). In their effort to respect and recognize young people, this organization has successfully connected with the passionate emotions of children and empowered them to acquire a rather deep affinity for hip-hop culture. In other words, the music industry seems to have capitalized on the attention of children primarily as a result of adults' limited attention to children's musical preferences.

Adult Intervention Strategies for Pro-Social Development

The success of the hip-hop phenomenon has been largely built on its ability to empathetically satisfy the emotional passions of young people. In the process of accomplishing this task, the industry has instituted a threefold marketing approach to: (a) gather demographic data about their audience—their likes, dislikes, motives, desires, and ambitions—in order to develop well defined consumer profiles; (b) use these profiles to gain insight into the thinking and feeling patterns of the audience in order to create sympathetic marketing strategies; and (c) connect with the feelings and thinking of the audience so that they can easily fit into their world through the use of sympathetic marketing strategies. Implementation of this concept has bridged the communication gap by merging the tenets of sympathetic and empathetic behavioral models with information from consumer profiles. This merger has resulted in pseudo social relationships—smoke and mirrors—with the targeted audience. This bridge well serves the commercial interests of the hip-hop industry as well as the emotional demands of young people for musical entertainment; however, this same bridge could become a vitally practicable asset to yet other social partners such as parents, educators, community leaders, and other involved adults.

It is the idea of many psychological researchers who study the development of pro-social behavior that sympathetic and empathetic skills are best learned through practice in role taking (Iannotti, 1978) and engagement in active social relationships, especially between adults and young children. According to research findings of Kestenbaum, Farber, and Sroufe (1989), adult caregivers had a considerable degree of influence on the development of children’s pro-
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social behavioral patterns. They concluded that children who have open secure connections with caring adults are apt to develop pro-social behavioral skills. According to Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, and Liable (1999), children who have caring adults who take time to talk with and explain the principles of pro-social behavior tend to behave in ways that show concern and helping feelings for others. Furthermore, praising children by using descriptive recognition for demonstrating consideration for others and verbally attributing pro-social motivation to them increases children’s capacity for empathy. Simply stated, adults who practice strategies similar to the empathetic techniques of the music industry (i.e., role taking with children, engaging children in meaningful social partnerships, reasoning with children about the importance of altruism, and often praising children for appropriate conduct) tend to foster children’s internalization of pro-social dispositions. Moreover, children who are exposed to adults who model generous, kind, and unselfish behavior tend to imitate such behaviors, especially when similar situations arise where such pro-social behaviors are warranted (Grusec, 1982, 1991; Kim & Stevens, 1987; Midlarskey & Bryan, 1972).

Just as sophisticated entertainment industry executives have done, interested adults should take time to devise plans that help them connect with the thinking and feeling nature of children, especially in the area of musical entertainment preferences. This connection could serve as a practicable foundation to destabilize the music industry’s communication bridge. Such a foundation would not only attenuate the strength of the music industry’s influence on children’s musical preferences; this foundation could also serve as an intermediate thoroughfare to encourage warm, open, secure adult-child social relationships.

Secure, trusting relationships between adults and children provide opportunities for caring adults to connect with children in ways that they could use to exchange ideas about pro-social behaviors and become social partners in fun activities such as music appreciation. Since most of the hip-hop music that children enjoy listening to involves lyrical rhymes that tell stories about one form of social relationship or another, it could provide an excellent opportunity for adults and children to connect and forge authentic, trusting social relationships. Such relationships could not only supply the foundation for open, secure, warm connections, but could also open avenues to engage in constructive dialog about the importance of pro-social behavior.

Methodology

Adolescents themselves have expressed the need for adults to become better acquainted with popular hip-hop music. Recently, I examined data from the Middle School Student Music Preference Questionnaire (MSSMPQ, see Appendix A) that was administered to middle school participants in focus group formats. Approximately 300 middle school students (6th, 7th, and 8th graders) from various urban, suburban, and rural schools across the United States responded to a 13 item questionnaire that asked participants how they felt about the effects of hip-hop music on their thinking and behaving, and what part they thought adults should play in children’s music-listening habits.

Participants

Three hundred and thirteen middle school students from six schools in six states participated in a series of minimally structured focus group discussion sessions designed to get their ideas about how their favorite music may impact their thinking and actions. Schools were selected based on prior contact with school administrators. These schools represented various geographic regions (California, Texas, Florida, Connecticut, and New Jersey). Initial letters to school district
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officials were mailed and followed with emails and telephone contacts. Participating principals at middle schools identified students for participation, and those students who were eligible to participate had parental consent, were provided with active assent, and were themselves proficient English speakers.

The student participants were middle school students, ranging in age from 11 to 15 years of age, with the mean age of 12.10 years. Thirty-six percent of them were in sixth grade, 36% in seventh grade, 28% in eighth grade, and 62% were girls. The racial distribution was 55% Black, 32% Hispanic (including Cuban, Haitian, Puerto Rican, and Mexican), 9% White, and 4% classified themselves as Other (bi-racial students classified themselves as Other).

**Instrument**

The questionnaire was developed to enable middle school students to think about and write their honest thoughts in response to each question, with additional spaces provided at the end for comments and pertinent questions students wanted the focus group to address. The instrument was pilot tested with a small group of middle school students in Texas, and feedback was adequately incorporated into the final form of the questionnaire. The complete questionnaire contained questions which were about equally distributed to elicit students' thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs concerning four central themes: (a) their self-perception and the effect of hip-hop music on their thinking patterns and behavior; (b) adult monitoring of children's musical preferences; (c) ways adults could communicate better with children; and (d) the importance of trust relationships between adults and children.

Six questions asked basic demographic information such as participant's age, grade, gender, race, school, city, and state. One of the central themes of the questionnaire elicited students' ideas about their self-perception and the effect of hip-hop music on their thinking patterns and behavior. For example, one question asked students, “Do you think that hip-hop music has any kind of effect on the thinking and behaving of young listeners (ages 10 – 15)?” Students were required to respond yes or no and were then provided an opportunity for written explanations for their response.

Another central theme of the questionnaire addressed students' beliefs about adult monitoring of children's musical preferences. For example, one question asked children, “In your opinion, should parents (and other concerned adults) monitor music young adolescents (10 – 15 years old) listen to?” Similarly, “In your opinion, could parents (and other adults) learn anything by listening to ‘hip-hop’ music?” Elaborations about their yes or no responses were elicited, from which further discussions followed.

The third theme centered on students' perceptions of the importance of open and honest communication with adults. Students were asked: “In your opinion, what are the three most important roles that parents or adults play in your life?” and “If you could write a book for parents that could help them learn to communicate better with you, what title would you give the book?” The respondents had an opportunity to elaborate on this question by listing the names of the first three chapters of their book.

The final theme was included in the questionnaire as a means to expand discussions about theme three and to bring out participants' thoughts about the importance of trust relationships between adults and children. For example, one question asked students, “Is it important to you that you have at least one adult whom you feel a sense of trust with?” Although respondents answered yes or no to this question, they were offered an opportunity to further explain their ideas.
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Procedures

Active parental or guardian consent was employed for obtaining participants. Two to three weeks prior to the beginning of the project, permission forms with letters were sent to the schools by mail. School principals distributed them to a select group of potential participants to take home and collected the completed forms when they were returned to school. At four of the schools, the principals selected small classes of students to participate in the sessions.

Most often, focus group sessions took place at the school site in a designated room such as the library or an empty classroom. The focus group facilitator read a script at the start of each session that included information about the voluntary nature of participation, and students were told to feel free to excuse themselves from any part of the sessions that made them feel uncomfortable. Facilitators also explained the confidentiality of session participation and informed students of the availability of school counselors who were available for consultations, if needed.

Each of the sessions lasted approximately one hour; some parts of the sessions were taped. Students were given facilitators’ telephone numbers and email addresses as contact information, if needed. None of the students opted to make use of that information. Although all sessions were conducted with small groups of 15 – 25 students, facilitators maintained order and mutual respect for participants.

Results and Discussion

In order to determine a relevant pattern of responses to the questionnaire, I calculated yes or no responses in terms of percentages and then categorized open-ended questions responses in terms of common patterns, and likewise with elaborations. With reference to students’ responses to questions about their self-perception and the effect of hip-hop music on their thinking patterns and behavior, an interesting pattern of responses emerged. In response to the question, “Do you think that ‘hip-hop’ music has any kind of effect on the thinking and behaving of young listeners (ages 10 – 15 years of age)?” most of the participants responded negatively. Sixty percent of sixth-graders, 78% of seventh-graders, and 72% of eighth-graders reported that they did not think that hip-hop music had an effect on them. When asked to offer an explanation for the negative responses, 53% of all students indicated that they did not always focus much attention on the actual lyrics of the songs. For example, one 15-year-old female explained:

No, there is no effect. Well, this is one of the main arguments I have with my parents. Adults don't understand that teens have a mind of their own and we know what's good and bad in the messages of music.

A twelve-year-old female wrote, “No, because we listen because it's the music that’s in style. Some of us don't even know the lyrics.” Similarly, another 12-year-old said, “No, because it's just music that we listen to.” Several students wrote responses that actually contradicted their explanations. One 12-year-old wrote, “No, it's just a way for me to relax when I'm mad or sad. Any kind of music can [make] me calm.” Another student wrote, “No. Not really. It is all depending on the listener, it is how your mind works.”

Not surprisingly, this pattern of responses indicated that the young adolescents seemed not to realize that they were constantly bombarded with messages from a wide variety of sources, with varying degrees of magnitude, and multiple layers of intensity, all of which persistently competed for their undivided attention. The large percentage of children reported that they did
not believe music had an effect on them. This finding was evidence of what could be considered as their metacognitive naivety, which when left unattended to by concerned adults may present opportunities for music industry exploitation. Alternatively, children’s lack of understanding about the effect of music on their developing emotions also provides opportunities for carefully designed pro-social development techniques.

In reference to self-perception, children were asked, “If you had to identify only one thing that made you feel happy about yourself as a person, what would it be?” The three main things that dominated middle school students’ thinking dealt with how they felt about their academic abilities, their relationships with peers, and various physical characteristics such as body size, eye color, and hair. Twenty-three percent reported that they felt happy about their academic achievement such as grades in school, being in the honors program, and being smart. Responses that characterized their thinking included: “That I was a straight A student. That I could be even smarter. I have worked hard to get and stay in honors. It wasn’t given to me in a silver spoon,” and, “Be a little bit smarter. I want to be smarter because I want to stay in honors.”

Twenty-two percent of respondents said that their relationships with peers made them feel happy. As one student responded, “My friends because they accept me how I am.” A 14-year-old female wrote, “More crowds/groups of people who accept me for what I am and not me having to change my ways. I don’t know why.” Fourteen percent of respondents mentioned some physical aspect of themselves. As one 14-year-old girl wrote, “I am very beautiful the way I am.”

A final question about self-perception was, “Does it make you feel good about yourself when adults (those who are important in your life) show that they value your ideas, opinions, and input?” Eighty-nine percent of all students responded affirmatively. For example, one student wrote, “It really makes me feel that I am important and not like others say, useless, worthless. I appreciate that a lot and I think more adults should act that way, too.” According to another student, “I feel like they actually listen and appreciate my ideas. I feel that they want me to feel right ‘at home’ with them. They want us to bond.” A twelve-year-old male addressed that question by saying, “I feel loved and important. They really care of what I say or think.”

A second questionnaire theme sought to encourage students to talk about roles adults should play in advising children about their music choices. One question asked students, “In your opinion, should parents (and other concerned adults) monitor music young adolescents (10 – 15 years old) listen to?” Overall, 61% of students responded “yes” and made interesting follow-up comments. For example, one male student wrote, “I think parents should familiarize their kids to all parts of hip-hop so they will know what’s out there. Then teach them the different aspects of hip-hop and why certain artist rap about different things.”

Another male student wrote, “[Parents should] teach them the messages that the artist is trying to get across.” Overall, of the categories that ask for children’s beliefs about parental and adult involvement in their musical preferences, the majority of middle-school students expressed the need for adult involvement.

When asked to respond to the question, “In your opinion, could parents (and other adults) learn anything by listening to ‘hip-hop’ music?” forty-five percent of participants felt as though adults would not be able to learn from hip-hop music. One student explained, “...even if adults listened to the music, they would not try to understand what the message is.” One 14-year-old girl wrote, “No, because they don’t understand it. It’s too violent for them.” Among the positive responses, one 12-year-old male wrote, “Yes, I guess it might help parents understand more
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about their kids and why they act like they do.” A 14-year-old female wrote, “Yeah, they can learn about what is influencing their children and can help prevent their children from doing these things.” facetiously, one female wrote, “Yes, they can learn to tolerate it!”

Two additional themes examined by the questionnaire dealt with the ways adults could communicate better with children and the importance of trust relationships between adults and children. I asked students to provide either a yes or no response to the question “Is it important to you that you have at least one adult who you feel a sense of trust with?” Eighty-one percent of focus group participants said that they believed it was important to maintain a trust relationship with at least one important adult and went on to list adults such as a parent, teacher, friend’s mother or father, older sister or brother as the important adult they trusted. For example, a 14-year-old female wrote, “Yeah because it feels good to let out or express your feelings with an adult because they know what’s right and they can give you advice on the topic you are telling them.” Similarly, a 12-year-old female wrote, “It’s important because when I feel depressed I could express my feelings.” Also, a 13-year-old male wrote, “Yes because I need to have someone to talk to about my problems and situations,” and a 12-year-old student said, “Because you have someone who you could talk with and share your secrets.”

In order to further distinguish children’s thoughts about relationships with adults, I sought to elicit their beliefs about roles parents and/or adults played in their lives. Students were asked to tell, “In your opinion, what are the three most important roles that parents and/or adults play in your life?” The majority of students listed some form of security for at least one of the roles. Forty-two percent of participants listed terms such as “shelter,” “provide us our needs,” “feed, clothe, and put a roof over my head,” “maintain my way of living,” and, “take care of you.” Twenty-one percent of students listed some form of communication from parents as an essential role they expected. For example, they used terms such as “friends,” “they are always there for me,” “always there for us when we need help,” “comprehension,” “listen to my opinions and ideas,” “as a friend,” “understand us without getting mad,” “listening to me,” “accept me for who I am,” “respect us as we respect them,” and “listening to us or talking to us.” Similarly, 19% of them expressed the idea of emotional attachment as a role of parents and used terms such as “loving me,” “love you and comfort you when you are sad and need attention,” “make me feel good about myself,” “love and care for you,” “nurturing us,” “love me and care about me,” “loving us and making sure we have a good education,” and “show love.” The idea came across clearly that the middle school children thought it was important to have loving connections with adults and that emotional bonds through communication were important in their relationships with adults.

**Examples of Intervention Strategies**

MTV’s idea of connecting with and demonstrating respect and recognition for its audience is exactly what middle school students said was important to them. Themes of interpersonal connection fit quite closely into the concept of sympathetic and empathetic ideals and have helped to ensure the effectiveness of product promotion—including the appeal of hip-hop music. The ingeniously calculated strategies of the music industry are primarily geared toward connecting to their young audiences through principles of respect and recognition, as middle school students indicated they expected from adults. Entertainment executives have so brilliantly stretched this very basic concept of sympathetic marketing to the extent that they believe it is not impossible for them to form a mental and emotional unit with the targeted consumer. Their research reports inform them of which particular audiences they are attracting and what type of interests these consumers have, including their likes and dislikes. They use this information as
a baiting mechanism designed to capture the loyal attention of young audiences through the idea that, "...immersion is a must—care about the things they care about, share their passions and pains, be sensitive to the issues related to them—if it’s a real concern or problem for young people, it should be taken just as seriously by you" (MTV Music Television, 2002, p. 32). This type of sympathetic marketing strategy that empathizes with the audience represents resourcefully intelligent marketing strategies that have paid off by propelling the music entertainment industry to a trillion dollar plus enterprise.

Certainly, the popularity of music media is in direct relation to its demand, regardless of the marketing techniques used to stimulate such demands. Simply put, music industry leaders have identified a lucrative business opportunity within the communication gap between children and parents and have put in place a process I shall refer to as sympathetic marketing strategies that are empathetic toward the consumer. Less direct involvement of parents and other well-meaning adults in children’s musical interests actually widens the communication gap and opens the way for a great commercial opportunity for the music industry to shape and guide the listening preferences of young people. That is to say, music executives have so effectively connected with the emotional passions and desires of young audiences that they are able to both stimulate certain musical interests and then guide the listener toward specific choices.

An example of one way adults could use popular musical lyrics to enhance meaningful social bonds that strike emotional chords with children is to examine the hip-hop recordings of popular artists. A superficial examination of one artist’s (Eminem—Marshall Bruce Mathers, III) song lyrics to his hit, \textit{Cleanin’ Out My Closet}, seems to reveal some deeply seated emotional feelings of anger, rage, depression, and maternal rejection that the young artist expressed to confront the person whom he believed to be responsible for his emotional pain—his mother. In an interview Eminem stressed that his artistic creativity is not always interpreted in the manner that he intended. He commented that the positive messages in his songs are often overlooked or misunderstood (Bozza, 2003). After having listened to this song several times, I got a deeper message that conveyed the young man as an artist who was using his musical or poetic genius in order to empty his negative feelings into a productive, yet lucrative channel. Although the lyrics to the song were apologetic expressions that otherwise appeared to have demeaned his mother for what he perceived as her out-of-touch maternal attitude and parental neglect, Eminem brilliantly demonstrated how it is possible to use creative talents to address and express the emotional pain he experienced in a seemingly destructive parent-child relationship. (Note: His mother, Debbie Mathers-Briggs, filed two lawsuits against her son and has her own recording single entitled “Dear Marshall” that asks her son to stop demeaning her).

In the preceding example, parents, educators, and other adults could creatively devise a role-taking activity plan to identify, interpret, and analyze the emotional nature of the parent and child described in the lyrics of this song. The work of Schulman and Mekler (1985) has provided some important suggestions about ways that parents could encourage children to behave pro-socially. Their list of recommendations to adults included such suggestions as:

1. Finding opportunities to point out other people’s feelings in various situations. Ask the child to explain their thoughts about how the characters feel in the situation and how he or she would feel if they were that character.

2. Encouraging the child to think about possible reasons why the characters feel the way they do.
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3. Allowing the child to identify connections between various actions and/or behaviors with the feelings evoked.

4. Acknowledging the child when she or he exhibits helping and caring behaviors—disapprove of selfish behavior.

5. Identifying opportunities to share one's own empathetic feelings with the child. Let the child know that good feelings come to all parties involved when helping and caring behaviors are demonstrated.

These recommendations can be related to song lyrics and outlined for parent-child activities that could assist children in appreciating the entertainment aspect of music within a pro-social framework. For example, using Schulman and Mekler's (1985) recommendations as guidelines and after jointly listened to the lyrics of Eminem's song, the adult could ask the child to take the role of the mother and explain how the mother may feel about the son's lyrics. Appendices B and C provide examples of strategies that adults could use to generate dialog and develop learning activities to share with children. The example in Appendix B is based on recommendations numbered 1, 2, and 4. Appendix C's example is based on recommendations numbered 3 and 5. Each example activity should be considered merely as a starting point that leads to opportunities for deeper social relationships. Each of the examples should engage the parent and child for about 45 to 50 minutes per setting, and may be easily modified to suit time considerations, age variances, and intellectual levels of those involved in the activity.

After one informal session between a parent and her 13-year-old son, the mother was really touched when her son told her that he was surprised to know that she really enjoyed the activity. Shortly after the first session, the mother mailed her son a short note thanking him for helping her to understand the lyrics of a hip-hop song. She wrote,

"Thanks for your help in making sure I understood what some of the words meant in the song we listened to. You made me feel like I was a fast learner—but, you are really a good teacher. Thanks, Love, Mom."

This simple note not only encouraged the son to continue activities of this sort; it also gave him a sense of respect from his mother and let him know that he was instrumental in helping her become more intimately connected with his developing self-concept. Therefore, it is evident that this type of activity has the potential to serve as a means for adults to strengthen their emotional connection to children.

Conclusion

My main focus has been that concerned adults can act as facilitators who guide middle school students' efforts by carefully assessing and critically evaluating popular lyrical characters. Children need to be able to think critically about the social, emotional, and relational implications involved in some of the lyrics they listen to in popular songs. I have described a research-based model that adults could use to learn to share meaningful teaching/learning opportunities with children—a model that could help each partner in the sharing process become a more empathetic and sympathetic listener with a broader knowledge of and appreciation for popular hip-hop music.

Middle school students from around the country—in rural, urban, and suburban school settings—have expressed their ideas about the importance of caring adults' involvement in their music appreciation. Young adolescents clearly told me that it was of utmost importance...
that they felt a sense of love, care, and support from significant adults in their lives. The one theme that runs consistently throughout these students’ responses is that they want caring adults to respect and connect with them. One avenue for fulfillment of their expressed need is through the music they listen to and enjoy. One technique adults could use in order to make the most of the hip-hop music phenomenon while connecting mentally and emotionally with young adolescents is the model as described in this article.

References

Appendix A
Questions from the Middle School Student Music Preference Questionnaire

Today's Date ___________ ID# ___________ School ___________ City/State ___________

Age ___________ Grade ___________ Gender ___________

Race ( ) Black/African American ( ) Hispanic ( ) White ( ) Other ________________

Please read each of the following questions—take a few moments to reflect on each question—then write your honest thoughts in response to each question. Thank you!

1. What is the one suggestion you would make to adults that would help communication between yourself and important adults in your life?

2. If you could change one thing about how you believe adults see you as a person, what would you change and why?

3. How does it make you feel when adults (those who are important in your life) show that they value your ideas, opinions, and input?

4. Is it important to you that you have at least one adult who you feel a sense of trust with?
   ( ) Yes ( ) No Explain:

5. In your opinion, what are the 3 most important roles that parents play in your life?

6. If you had to identify only one thing that made you feel happy about yourself as a person, what thing would it be?

7. Do you think that hip-hop music has any kind of effect on the thinking and behaving of young listeners (ages 10 – 15 years of age)? Explain:

8. In your opinion, could parents (and other adults) learn anything by listening to hip-hop music?
   ( ) Yes ( ) No Explain:

9. If you could write a book for parents that would help them learn to communicate better with you, what title would you give the book?

10. List the names of the first 3 chapters of your book:
    Chapter 1. ________________________________________________________________
    Chapter 2. ________________________________________________________________
    Chapter 3. ________________________________________________________________

11. In your opinion, should parents (and other concerned adults) monitor music young adolescents (10 – 15 years old) listen to? ( ) Yes ( ) No Explain:

12. Do you have a hobby? ( ) Yes ( ) No Explain:

13. Other Comments: You may also use the back of this sheet. Thank you for your help.
Appendix B

Example I: Strategies that Adults Can Use to Engage Children in Pro-Social Behavior about Hip-Hop Musical Lyrics

Recommendations Number 1, 2, and 4

Find opportunities to point out the other person’s feelings in various situations. Ask the child to explain their thoughts about how the characters feel in the situation and how he or she would feel if they were that character; encourage the child to think about possible reasons why the characters feel the way they do; and acknowledge the child when she or he exhibits helping and caring behaviors—disapprove of selfish behavior.

Activity Purpose

To help adults and children think about and explore opportunities for pro-social behavioral development by using popular song lyrics.

Agenda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Listen to song lyrics</td>
<td>One-on-one sessions with Q/A format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Exchange ideas about song</td>
<td>Adult-led penetration questions with child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Create illustrative ideas</td>
<td>Child-centered artistic expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Assess quality of session</td>
<td>Adult/child critique each other (child offers critique first)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Materials Needed

Access to the music, comfortable seating arrangement, writing materials—colored pens/markers, colored paper, etc.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this session, each social partner should be able to:

- Carefully listen to the lyrics of popular music
- Identify the main themes and characters involved in the song
- Infer lyrical characters’ feelings
- Predict alternative outcomes
- Generalize unstated causes for certain emotions and actions
- Appraise each other’s contribution to the session

Procedure

The following dialog is an example to guide participants along one possible pathway toward pro-social development in the context of popular music. It is of utmost importance that participants begin this activity with the idea that each will facilitate mutual acceptance. This activity represents only one avenue through which caring adults may (a) strengthen mutual respect between children, (b) learn to speak in a voice that acknowledges children’s sophistication, (c) allow children to participate and make them want to, and; (d) connect both mentally as well as emotionally with children’s passions (Nickelodeon, 2002).
One additional note—adults should be certain to preview the popular song before the session. If the chosen song has been labeled “explicit material,” then it may be a good idea for adults to make a special effort to obtain an edited version of the song, or be prepared to deal with the reality of the nature of the lyrics and messages. Keep in mind, though, a major segment of the popular hip-hop music that children enjoy listening to contains language that adults may consider offensive, coarse, and otherwise distasteful.

**Suggested Dialog**

**Adult to child:** What do you think the overall feeling of the young man is toward his mother? What has he said in this song that would help you understand his feelings?

**Child to adult:** The young man feels as though his mother has hurt him a lot in his life.

**Adult to child:** You think that the young man is hurting? Well, what are some of the things that the young man said that let you know that his mother has hurt him? What are some reasons that the mother could have had that made her treat him the way he said she did?

**Child to adult:** Well, I feel like the young man was hurt because the mother told him that she wished he was dead. That hurt his feelings because it made him feel like she did not love him and wanted him out of her life. If you wished someone was dead, that could really hurt a person’s feelings, especially if that person wants you to love them.

And I feel like the mother could have been feeling hurt because her husband had just up and left her with the children. That could hurt her and she could have been being cruel to the children because her husband did not want to be with her. So, she felt like she was hurt so badly that she wanted just wanted to hurt other people who loved her. I think that she was very depressed and sad and that’s why she was mean to her children.

**Adult to child:** You seem to really have a good feeling for how those characters in the song were feeling. I think that it’s good that you picked up on how badly it feels when some one thinks that his mother does not love him. I guess it does make both of them feel badly.

**Child to the adult:** Yeh, both of them felt badly about what the other one was saying and doing to them. They were trying to hurt each other.

**Adult to child:** I wonder how it feels when people try hard to hurt people instead of trying hard to make other people feel good.

**Child to adult:** I don’t know. I think that it would make me feel good if someone tried to say nice things to me.

**Adult to child:** Do you think it would make another person happy if you said something to make them feel good.

**Child to adult:** I guess so.

**Adult to child:** Out of all the things that the young man said to his mother in the song, what do you think hurt the mother’s feelings the most? How would you feel if you were the mother in the song and you had a son like Eminem who told the whole world the kinds of things that he said on his song?

**Child to adult:** (Of course, children’s responses vary, but be sure to listen carefully to what the child says and use his or her response in order to gauge his or her true feelings about who he or she feels is justified in the song and why.)
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Adult to child: I wonder whether you could think of a few lyrics that express the mother’s true feelings about her son. Think about how she feels after having heard this song, and then tell me how you feel she would respond.

Child to adult: Do I have to write this, or can I just tell you?

Adult to child: I think you should write it, and then you can read it to me so that I can tell you how it sounds to me. Or maybe, you can get my opinion about it, and then let a couple of your friends hear it and see what they think about it. OK?

Child to adult: That’s probably not a good idea to let my friends hear it. I think that I should just write it for the two of us.

Adult to child: OK. Do you think that you could also use those colored pens and code them according to different feelings? Like, you could use the bright blue pen when you write about sad feelings and the yellow pen when you write about cheerful feelings...

Child to adult: Yeh! I could use the red pen to express anger and the dark blue pen for really, really sad feelings.

Adult to child: You have an excellent point, there.

Child to adult: Maybe I should use some colored paper, too. Or, maybe I could draw the facial expressions of the characters in the song.

Session Conclusion

The adult may conclude the session by asking the child to assess the adult’s engagement in the activity. For example, ask the child to tell whether he or she thinks the adult learned anything new, and if so to explain. If the adult determines that the child needs assistance in explaining what he or she perceived was learned, the adult should assist. Accordingly, the adult should note the accuracy of the child’s explanation and show genuine interest in the child’s musical interest.

Be sure to ask the child if he or she is willing to engage in this type of musical activity in the future. Ask the child for his input in a way that could help to improve the quality of the activity. Be sure to make written notes about the feedback the child gives. Be sure that the child feels as though he or she was respected and recognized as the authority in this musical appreciation activity. The child must feel a certain sense of control in the process of guiding the adult into mutual appreciation for what he or she thinks is important in his or her world.

One final note, be sure to write a short, “Thank You” note to the child to show sincere appreciation for the opportunity to share in a meaningful, life-changing dialog with him or her. The note could be slipped into his or her coat pocket, lunch bag, or even mailed. This simple gesture will ensure the authenticity of the adult’s motives to enhance trust between them.
Appendix C

Example II: Strategies that Adults Can Use to Engage Children in Pro-Social Behavior about Hip-Hop Musical Lyrics

**Recommendations Number 3 and 5**

Allow the child to identify connections between various actions and/or behaviors with the feelings evoked; identify opportunities to share your own empathetic feelings with the child. Let the child know that good feelings come to all parties involved when helping and caring behaviors are demonstrated.

**Activity Purpose**

To help children identify connections between various actions and/or behaviors with the feelings evoked and to identify opportunities to share one’s own empathetic feelings with children.

**Agenda:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Listen to song lyrics</td>
<td>One-on-one sessions with open dialogic instruction</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Exchange ideas about song</td>
<td>Children-led explanation of lyrics</td>
<td>15 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Share empathetic feelings</td>
<td>Adult shapes interaction</td>
<td>20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Assess quality of session</td>
<td>Adult and child critique each other’s input</td>
<td>10 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Materials Needed**

Access to music, comfortable seating arrangement, writing materials, etc.

**Learning Objectives**

Upon completion of this session, each social partner should be able to:

- Carefully listen to the lyrics of hip-hop song
- Identify the main themes/characters involved
- Infer characters’ feelings
- Share personal empathetic feelings
- Generalize cause-effect relationships implied in song
- Appraise each other’s contribution to the session

**Procedure**

See suggestions in Example 1.

**Suggested Dialog**

**Adult to child:** What do you think the overall feeling of the young man was toward his mother? What did he say in the song that made you understand how he was feeling?

**Child to adult:** The young man felt very badly about the way his mother had treated him as a child and even though he did not want to hurt his mother or make her cry, he wanted her to know that she was not a good mother to him.
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Adult to child: If you were going to express those kinds of feelings, how would you start off the conversation with your mom? Would you start it off by saying what he did, that he never meant to hurt her or make her cry?

Child to adult: Maybe so.

Adult to child: How do you think that the mother felt when she first sat down to hear what he wanted to tell her... before he went into details?

Child to adult: I think that she thought maybe he was going to say something bad to her—but, maybe not as bad as he really said to her.

Adult to child: I want you to write three (3) or four (4) sentences that tell what you feel the mother was thinking just before she heard all of the details that he told her about how he felt? Just jot them down. You don’t have to spell everything correctly. (After the child jots down what he or she feels the mother was thinking, the adult carefully reads what the child has written, and...)

Adult to child: You really were insightful in getting into the mom’s head. I wonder why you feel this way about her. What do you think she’ll do after she has heard all of this from her son?

Child to adult: I guess she will get mad and try to say some things that will hurt him just like he hurt her. I guess she’ll just get really mad at him.

Adult to child: Should she?

Child to adult: I guess. If he says mean things to her, then she will probably say mean things to him.

Adult to child: What would you say to him if you were the mother?

Child to adult: I would try to explain that I am sorry for hurting him. I would say that I did not mean to hurt him. You know, sort of like he said to her at the beginning of the song.

Adult to child: Oh, that’s a good one. I see that you picked up on that cue. That’s really a good point for you! Do you feel like she’ll be able to cope with her hurt feelings? How has she coped with them in the past?

Child to adult: Thanks. But, I don’t know how she will act now that he said those mean things to her. I think that she will not be able to cope with these feelings. I think that I would probably cry a lot if I was the mother. She should cry and then try to get herself together.

Adult to child: Do you think the son should do anything to help his mom cope with the hurt she feels right now?

Child to adult: Well, I think that he is not going to do a lot to help his mother because he is already angry with her. He told her that he hopes that she burns in...well, you know where! I think that he is angry because of how she treated him when he was a kid, and he just wanted to let her know how much she hurt him.

Adult to child: If you were the young man, would you help your mother even though she had hurt you?

Child to adult: Oh, I think that I would, but, I think that I might be very angry with my mother. But, I don’t think that I would tell her that I wished she would burn in...But I might just tell her not to cry. I might tell her to go to the doctor and see if he could help her with her sad feelings. She needs some kind of help. Maybe, I would help her. I think I would help her.
Adult to child: You know, I guess I would be somewhat hurt if I was the mother in this song. I think it would make me feel much better if my son did something to try to help me see that he really loved me. I think I would try to let him know that I was sorry for the horrible way that I treated him when he was growing up. I know that I would try to help him understand that I had learned how to be a better mother, now. I wonder if he would understand and give me a chance to be a better mother. How would you respond to me if we were those people in the song?

Child to adult: It would be really hard to do that. But, anyway, I already know that you are a good mom and that you try your best to be a good mom. Let’s talk about something different, now. This is making me feel sad.

Adult to child: Oh, you’re right. I sincerely appreciate your honesty. I am so happy that you think I am a good mom. It makes me feel like doing even better when you tell me those kinds of things. I think that you are really a mature young man because you realize that I am trying to be a good mom.

Child to adult: Well, thanks. I think that we need to finish this activity because I have some other things to do tonight.

Adult to child: Okay. Just one more thing. Will you please write me a short note and tell me those nice things you just said? I just want to keep it with me so that when you get older, I can always know that you appreciated me.

Child to adult: Okay.

Session Conclusion

This session may be concluded by showing how deeply the child’s honesty and openness is appreciated. It is of utmost importance that sincerity and expressions of appreciation are shown and that bonds between the adult and child are strengthen. Through this activity the child is slowly letting the adult into his or her most private world and here is where the adult may glimpse the child’s inner feelings and desires. Gaining the child’s confidence on this level is a very fragile activity and can easily be misguided if the adult is not careful and compassionate.
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