

## All rapped up: What influence does hip-hop have on kids?

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50 Cent.

Kanye West.

Lil' Wayne.

The artists have become some of the biggest names in the rap industry by bringing different styles to the ever-evolving genre called hip-hop.

Hip-hop music, which will be recognized at the BET (Black Entertainment Television) Awards tonight, has proven that it isn't a passing fad like some thought years ago. But despite the artistic differences of today's rappers -- everything from 50 Cent's hard-core lyrics about guns, drugs and porn to West's celebrations of life -- a debate continues about whether rap music has a positive or negative influence on kids.

Few concrete studies have been conducted on the topic, but one thing is obvious: Hip-hop has infiltrated nearly every facet of our culture, from fashion and dance to television, marketing, language and theater. Even religion benefits from a good beat: hip-hop services have been a draw at churches across the country. With this, children are being exposed to it at an earlier age. Take the PG-rated "Alvin and The Chipmunks." The cartoon characters sport baggy jeans, gold chains and use slang in the 2007 film.

It can be chalked up to pure entertainment, but in inner cities across America, where music about gang life, sexual promiscuity and drugs is commonplace on the streets, boys have become victims of gun violence, girls become mothers before their time and teens sell drugs to make money.

"Hip-hop has been one of the most influential art forms ever," said Jam Donaldson, former executive producer and writer of BET's "We Got to Do Better," a show that examines behaviors found within today's hip-hop culture. "When you combine the lyrics with the imagery (in the videos), it becomes a very powerful influence."

### Back in the day

After humble beginnings in New York during the mid-1970s, hip-hop was first introduced to mainstream America through the Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 disco-rap song "Rapper's Delight."

Throughout the 1980s, lyrics consisted of partying and playful battle-rapping through the likes of Run DMC and L.L. Cool J. "Gangsta rap" emerged during the latter part of the decade when Compton, Calif.-based N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) used violent lyrics to illustrate the obstacles that urban youths face, such as poverty and police brutality. The group was also among the first to implement highly sexually explicit lyrics.

Negative lyrics are being taken seriously today. While not mandatory, many record labels have put Parental Advisory Labels on artists' covers, according to the Recording Industry Association of America. Even West's albums -- which are considered clean compared to those by, say, 50 Cent -- have required advisory stickers.

Despite criticism from numerous parents and politicians, N.W.A. and its "gangsta rap" has heavily influenced the work of the newest generation of rappers including Snoop Dogg and The Game.

And that's part of the problem, Donaldson said.

She said many kids look to rappers' lifestyles for "the definition of success, of manhood and womanhood." For some, it justifies swearing, degrading women and experimenting with drugs, she said.

"To associate success with cars, rims, 'bitches' and jewelry is a very, very dangerous effect on our young people."

Yet, Donaldson said not all hip-hop artists should get a bad rap. She said a handful of artists like Common and Lupe Fiasco, both of Chicago, and Atlanta's Outkast, provide positive messages in their rhymes. Christian rappers like Lecrae and Da' T.R.U.T.H. are even packing churches across the country with a new form of the genre they call "Holy Hip-Hop."

Rap music is also widely used for educational purposes. Media groups such as CNN, USA Today and The New York Times have praised FloCabulary, a New York-based company that utilizes hip-hop music to foster literacy. Schools have even effectively used rap to teach mathematics.

Dr. Jaleel Abdul-Adil, an associate professor of clinical psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, also believes rap can be positive, but he said it can have negative effects on grade school kids, particularly because they are less capable of separating reality and entertainment.

Abdul-Adil said some artists rap about gun-toting and drug-dealing but have never had such experiences. Other artists point to living out that type of lifestyle but became entertainers to escape the negativity. Still others boast that there's nothing wrong with life on the street. "But youths don't always make those sophisticated distinctions," Abdul-Adil said.

While Abdul-Adil said "it's cowardice" to blame rap music for the perils of urban America, he said rappers should be more mindful of how they deliver their messages.

"With validity comes responsibility," Abdul-Adil said. "You can describe a problem. But the key issue is, 'What are you doing to help solve it?'"

### **Local impact**

Aerion Jackson, 14, of Kankakee, said he's never been influenced by the negative lyrics of his

favorite rappers Lil' Wayne and N.W.A. founder, the late Eazy E. In fact, Aerion said the rappers' wealthy lifestyles inspire him to succeed, and that the foul language found on rap songs is no different from what he hears at school and around his eastside neighborhood.

Aerion's mother, Michelle, prefers to buy clean versions of albums for him and his 12-year-old sister, Donnaisha. But that hasn't gone over too well with Aerion.

"I can't go without the curse words. It don't sound right," he said.

Donnaisha, on the other hand, said she has started to embrace the gospel rap songs she hears while attending events by the Kankakee Area Youth 4 Christ -- an example of why it's unfair to solely link negative youth behaviors to rap, Donaldson said.

She said if parents spent more time with their children and encourage them to stay in their books, kids wouldn't be so consumed with what messages are sent from hip-hop.

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