

BEHIND THE MUSIC

Music Literacy and Healthy Relationships

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Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

1. Describe at least two messages about sex and relationships contained in the lyrics of popular music.
2. Identify at least three messages that promote the qualities that define a healthy relationship: honesty, equality, respect and responsibility.
3. Have fun!¹

Audience

College-age students (ages 18-22)

Rationale

iTunes, Pandora, Rdio, Spotify! The ubiquity of today's music makes it a great tool for teaching! Of course, some adults are quick to condemn modern lyrics, especially since research suggests a possible correlation between "degrading" sexual lyrics in some music that teens listen to and the onset of early sexual behaviors.² However, sexual messages in popular culture are nothing new. Overtly sexual messages have been observed in the lyrics of Aristophanes' plays, in the verses of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and in the sonnets by William Shakespeare. In music, sexually suggestive song titles are plentiful, spanning recent decades from the Rolling Stones' "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" and The Doors' "Light My Fire," to the Captain and Tennille's "Do That To Me One More Time"; Musique's "Push, Push, in the Bush"; Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing"; Madonna's "Like a Virgin"; George Michael's "I Want Your Sex"; the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Suck My Kiss"; 50 Cent's "Candy Shop," and to today's popular hits.

It is important to note that this recent research, which has been widely reported and hyped in the popular press, has identified an *association* between degrading sexual music and sexual behavior, but not necessarily a cause-and-effect relationship. Nevertheless, all this publicity presents a golden opportunity for educators to help participants critically examine the messages they are hearing in the music that surrounds them, and to think about how they might infuse the qualities of a healthy relationship into the lyrics of their favorite songs.

¹ Not really a measurable objective, but you know they will!

² Martino, S. C., Collins, R. L., Elliott, M. N., Strachman, A., Kanouse, D. E., and Berry, S. H. (2006). Exposure to degrading versus nondegrading music lyrics and sexual behavior among youth. *Pediatrics*, 118(2): e430-e441.

Lesson Outline

Introductions, Group Agreements and Purpose (See **The Lesson Essentials**, p. 3)

Think About the Music

Listening for HERR

Rewriting the Messages

Conclusion

Materials

- Easel paper/whiteboard
- Index cards
- Current music about relationships that can be played for participants

Note: Websites that provide or sell music for download include iTunes, Pandora, Rdio, Spotify and YouTube. These websites also have apps available for iOS and Android devices. Some websites allow portions of songs to be played free of charge. These short clips are perfect for this lesson if you have in-class Internet access, along with speakers.

- Lyrics for a few popular songs, generally available at websites like [AZLyrics](#). (Apps like SoundHound will provide lyrics in real time.)

Procedure

THINK ABOUT THE MUSIC

1. Ask participants to think about the music that they listen to on a regular basis. Invite a few people to share their favorite songs and/or artists. Affirm the diversity of music named, and remind the group that everyone is entitled to their own opinion about music!
2. Tell participants that researchers have learned that young people who begin to have sexual intercourse and other sexual behaviors earlier than others also tend to listen to certain types of music with sexual themes.

Discussion Questions:

- a. What kinds of sexual messages might be heard in today's music?
- b. How closely do you listen to the lyrics of the music you like?
- c. How do *you* think listening to music might affect sexual decisions?
- d. What age do you think is too young for a person to have sexual intercourse?
- e. Do you think the research findings would be the same among teens *you know*? Why or why not?

3. Tell participants that people are constantly surrounded by messages about sex, love and relationships in music, and they may or may not be paying attention to the words. Give an example of music with sexual messages from your own experience, such as the following:

During the holiday season, people might hear a song originally from 1944, “Baby It’s Cold Outside,” and not realize the song is about one person trying to coerce the other into staying and spending the evening together. They might just go about their business, shopping and humming along.

Explain that during this lesson, participants are going to listen carefully for the messages in today’s popular music, especially songs that pertain to relationships.

LISTENING FOR HERR

1. Tell participants that first we need to examine what makes a relationship “healthy.” Write **HONESTY, EQUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY** and **RESPECT** on the easel paper/whiteboard and explain that researchers who study relationships describe healthy ones as those having these four qualities. Ask students for examples of each quality.
2. Ask participants to pair up, and distribute an index card to each pair, along with printed lyrics of selected songs. Play a couple of songs that are currently popular (e.g., songs ranked in the “Top 10”), and ask participants to listen carefully for messages about **honesty, equality, responsibility** and **respect**. They are to make notes whenever they hear these qualities mentioned or contradicted in the song.

Discussion Questions:

- a. What are these songs saying about sex? Love? Relationships?
- b. What in these songs seemed healthy? Unhealthy?
- c. What do you think about the messages in these songs?

REWRITING THE MESSAGES

1. Ask participants to brainstorm genres or types of music. Examples might be “adult contemporary,” “alternative,” “classic rock,” “country,” “dance,” “goth,” “grunge,” “hip hop,” “house,” “Latin,” “pop,” “punk,” “R&B,” “rap,” “reggae,” “soul,” etc. Write these on the easel paper/whiteboard as participants call them out.

2. Tell participants they may now divide into groups based on their favorite music genre. Group size should be about four or five participants per genre. If there is more than this number in any of the groups, ask participants to form an additional group for those genres.
3. Give each group a sheet of easel paper and a marker, and ask them to choose a recorder. Tell participants they are to think of song titles that talk about **sex, love** or **relationships** within that particular musical genre; the recorder should write the titles of these songs on easel paper. Give groups about ten minutes for this brainstorm, and encourage them to list at least five titles.
4. As participants finish, ask them to think of the lyrics of five of the songs they listed and discuss whether the songs address any of the qualities of a healthy relationship: **honesty, equality, responsibility** or **respect**. Then ask them to share if any of the songs address consent.
5. After about five minutes more, tell participants they are to pick one song for which at least one person in the group knows the lyrics. The song they select should be one that contradicts the qualities of a healthy relationship. Explain that they are to develop a **new** verse for the song. The new verse should introduce one of the qualities of a healthy relationship or practices of consent into the song. They should do their best to match the rhythm and meter of the original song.
6. Give an example, such as the following, saying that a group of educators came up with this **new** verse for the popular 1980s song by Tina Turner, “What’s Love Got to Do with It?”:

*What’s truth got to do with it?
What’s truth? It’s a responsible emotion.
What’s truth got to do with it?
Who needs a lie when the truth can be spoken?³*

Give participants about 10 minutes to work.

7. As participants are finishing, tell them they have the chance to sing — as a group — their song, including both a verse from the *original* version, and the *new* verse they created.

Note: Depending on the setting in which you are teaching, you may want to instruct students to substitute “bleep” for any offensive language when they sing the verses.

8. Give each group a chance to perform.

³ Special thanks to the clever Planned Parenthood educators who created this verse!

Discussion Questions:

- a. How did you go about selecting the songs you worked on? What was *most* unhealthy about them?
- b. What was it like to recreate the lyrics for these songs?
- c. What was it like to perform the songs?
- d. Which messages in these new lyrics seemed most healthy?
- e. Do you think the music industry should take more responsibility for the messages in today's music? Why or why not?

CONCLUSION

1. Conclude the lesson by asking participants to think about how this activity will influence their experience of music in the future.
2. Invite participants to share one thing they will keep in mind when they hear a popular or catchy song.