

A P A R E N T ' S  
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G U I D E

# Gen Z's Love of Music

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# We Can't Stop the Music, But We Can Use It to Love Our Kids

Remember driving down the road, just hoping and wishing the local radio station would play your favorite song before you made it to your destination? Or how about waiting with a cassette tape, ready to hit record the instant a great song finally came over the airwaves? And oh the frustration if you got impatient and recorded a mediocre song only to hear the best song start right after it. The emotions, the waiting, the drama!

Though music has existed since the beginning of time, never before has it been so accessible, so on-demand, so ubiquitous. Popular music plays over the speakers in grocery stores, restaurants, and gas stations. But with streaming platforms like Spotify, today's teens have never experienced the agony of having to go to bed without once hearing a song they liked that day, let alone what most generations throughout history experienced: only hearing music when there were musicians around to create it.

Music has become ingrained in the everyday lives of our teens. Rather than banning it or allowing unfettered access to it, let's discuss how to use it as a way to love our kids better and to help them be discerning, wise followers of Christ.

## —— I liked “secular” music when I was a teen, so what's different about music today?

Music has become not just a staple of teens' lives, but also—as some put it—their religion or [even life itself](#). Teens consume music almost constantly and during just about every activity. As a result, they are continuously taking all kinds of ideas into their hearts and minds. The vast majority of Gen Z females regularly listen to at least five different musical genres and say that [music is either “important” or “very important” to their lives](#). In 2017, Americans spent [an average of 32 hours per week](#) listening to music. This average is an increase from 2016's average of 26.6 hours per week. By the middle of 2017, Americans had listened to 184 billion songs (yeah, that's billion with a “b”) on online streaming platforms. And when 85% of 13- to 15-year-olds acknowledge [they stream music online](#) and 70% of 16- to 24-year-olds agree that “music is important,” you can bet music marketers are aiming right at teenagers.

One consequence of the instant access to music that online streaming provides is that teens can basically listen to anything they want. Only a decade or so ago, if teens wanted to listen to a CD with mature content, they had to borrow it from a friend or buy it from a store, which would probably label the CD with a parental warning. Then the [iPod came along](#), making CDs obsolete and giving teens the ability to purchase music without having to go to a store. The iPod also made it possible to easily transport a huge amount of music wherever people went, something that had not previously been possible. Of course, now the iPod is obsolete. If your teens can't find what they want to hear on a platform like Spotify, they can almost certainly find it on YouTube.

This exposure to a broader amount of music has benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, teens can explore a greater variety of styles and perspectives. A significant benefit of being able to find so many styles of music is the ability to find more types and styles of worship music. On the other hand, teens are also open to more harmful ideas. Something to keep in mind is that

*because the amount of music teens access is so vast, it can be overwhelming for them to try to sort through the good and bad ideas in every song they encounter.*

Another difference in how teens listen to music now, as we said earlier, is that they often listen to it constantly throughout the day. Whereas older generations tend to find listening to background music while working to be distracting, today's teens are much more comfortable with listening to music while they're doing other tasks. Some might even feel that they are unable to accomplish their tasks without the help of their music. While it's not good to be too dependent on something, there is evidence that shows that music does actually help people [be more productive](#).

## —— Why does Gen Z like music so much?

### **1. It's enjoyable.**

Despite the fact that music consumption has changed over the past decades, there are more similarities than differences between you and your kids when it comes to your musical tastes. The most significant reason why people listen to music is arguably that it's enjoyable. It brings beauty and pleasure into our lives and makes mundane tasks more pleasant. When we blare it in our cars or headphones, it can feel like it's legitimizing or fueling our lives.

### **2. It reflects and validates our experiences.**

Music moves us emotionally. It expresses joy, sadness, anger, and many other feelings. It often reflects what we've gone through in our lives. It helps us to see the world in new ways by introducing us to other people's perspectives. Music also offers a way to externalize painful or complicated emotions. If your teens are happy or frustrated, listening to a song that expresses how they feel is like finding a friend who understands them. Music is often a way for teens to [cope with their lives](#).

### **3. It's a way of defining ourselves and connecting with others.**

Not all teenagers love music to the same extent, but music is often extremely personal to them. It's way of identifying not just how they feel, but who they are. So if we parents trivialize the music our kids love, it will likely seem to them as though we're not interested in getting to know them. Music is also extremely effective at connecting people as groups, similar to how people bond over other hobbies, like sports. Perhaps because music has become more individualized, it can be very exciting for our teens to find someone else who has the same musical tastes and who likes the same bands they do. Meeting these kindred spirits is like finding someone who speaks their same language and who really "gets" them.

## —— Does music really influence teens' actions?

Because all actions begin as ideas, yes, music can influence teen behavior. But it's almost never the case that someone listens to a song about snorting cocaine and then immediately goes and does it. Someone might never do drugs, but they're likely to become more accepting of drug use if they consume media that is constantly depicting drug use as normal. Music's influence works slowly by gradually shaping thoughts and feelings. It's more likely that music that is angry or depressing will cause teens to be angrier or more depressed. We know someone who realized he needed to stop listening to heavy metal bands like Avenged Sevenfold and Five Finger Death Punch because of the negative effect that type of music was having on his thoughts.

Many students will insist that they don't pay attention to the lyrics of their music, but just enjoy the sound of it. However, even if they aren't catching every word, they will probably catch at least some of words, especially if they listen to a particular song over and over again. If your kids claim they are not listening to the words of certain songs, you might observe whether or not they can sing along with those songs. It's also worth pointing out that when the Bible encourages us to dwell on "whatever is true" and "whatever is pure" (Phil. 4), that command does not depend on **how the content affects us** but on **what the content is**. It is important to be aware of how songs are affecting us, but this is not the only consideration we need to make when deciding what music to consume. More on this idea later.

## — What draws teens to popular and secular music? Why don't they like Christian music?

We should start by saying that while we're about to give a few criticisms of Christian music, we don't think there's a problem with listening to it. It's great that many parents want to listen to music that's positive and family-friendly, and Christian music meets this criteria. That being said, we do think there are some issues with how people often perceive and approach Christian music.

First of all, it's odd to use the word "Christian" as though it were a genre like "rock," "pop," or "jazz." Doing so implies that a particular sound is Christian, which is just as strange as saying that a particular sound is "Islamic," "Buddhist," or "Mormon." What's more, calling certain music "Christian" [implies that some music belongs to God](#) while other music doesn't. The reality is that God is the originator of all music; human beings, then, use music for good or bad purposes.

One of the main reasons your teens might not enjoy so-called Christian music is that it tends to focus on communicating a Christian message over creating a beautiful piece of art. This mentality is harmful to any type of art, no matter what the people creating it believe. Christian music (and even some worship music) is, to a large extent, not particularly complex or original. Some Christians forgive its lack of musicality because its messaging matters so much. But teens aren't always willing to do the same. And the fact is that there is such a great variety of music available that teens who want to explore and diversify their tastes are better able to do so *outside of* the current Christian music industry.

Something else to be aware of is that labeling music "Christian" can lead us to assume that all the ideas in that music are good. But it is possible for music labeled as "Christian" to contain bad ideas, and frankly even worse theology. There also seems to be an expectation that Christian music must always be positive and hopeful (this way of thinking shows up in Christian novels and films as well). But this mentality doesn't reflect the songbook of the Bible itself, the Psalms. A significant number of the psalms are actually [songs of lament](#), songs filled with grief, despair, and even anger against God. The psalms honestly [deal with the pain of life](#). If Christian music is not willing to do so as well, then it's not willing to rise to the level of the Bible's honesty.

And here's the real kicker: The movers and shakers of the Christian music industry are **not making music for your teens**. They're marketing to you! Specifically, they're mainly [marketing to Christian moms](#). ***So if your kids don't like the Christian music station, don't assume they're somehow disinterested in Christianity.*** They probably just find other music more interesting.

On the other hand, [while pop music is often formulaic](#) and unoriginal, it is being marketed to your teens. (There is, of course, tons of interesting music out there that isn't pop music, but popular music is pretty influential.) Pop music frequently gives voice to teenage joys, frustrations, accomplishments, and difficulties. [A recent article in New York Magazine](#) explains it this way: "The music running through the charts is filled with qualities that look a lot like the aspirations and survival strategies of people who've felt marginalized." Teens' favorite music often illustrates what they feel but dare not say aloud. In addition, there's the very important fact that music is a way for kids to be accepted by their peers, who are almost certainly not listening to the Christian radio station.

## —— Speaking of evaluating the messages in music, what does the Bible say about music, anyway?

A few denominations forbid their followers from making or enjoying music, but the Bible does not. [As explained in Christianity Today](#), "The Bible documents music as a means of readying an army for battle (Ps. 68), inspiring people to worship (Ps. 100), evangelism (Rom. 15:9), prophecy (Is. 23), lament, testimony (Is. 27:1-3), and celebration (James 5:13)." God, the one and only great Creator and Beginner of all things, grants artistic ability and delight to His children by His grace. As we know, what God allows to exist in this world can be used for good or evil (Rom. 8), and His nature grants us the choice to use or abuse His gifts.

So while music does not save people, it can move people to seek salvation. Music does not heal, but it can encourage healing. It can instruct, inspire, and influence. The question we should ask about music is not, "Is it Christian or secular?" but rather, "What is the spirit behind what we're hearing?" Well-respected musician, producer, and Christian [T Bone Burnett](#) [said](#) (*paywall*) it like this: "As a believer, I can write songs about the light or about what I see because of the light."

## —— So how should we decide what music to listen to?

Music is complex, so answering this question is not as simple as you might think. Remember that nothing about the Gospel or our journey in Christ through this life can really be called "family friendly" or "safe" as those terms are used in entertainment. At the same time, secular music can highlight truth and bring as deep of a spiritual discussion as any hymn. Here are a few points to consider as you help your teen evaluate what music to listen to.

### **1. Is it artistically good?**

When it comes to music, Christians have tended to prioritize the message over the medium, but the medium is just as important. Listening to poorly made music with overtly Christian lyrics communicates to both Christians and non-Christians that God doesn't care about art or beauty. This underlying message could be just as damaging to the Gospel as listening to a song with lyrics that communicate lies about God and the world He created.

### **2. Is it saying something true about the world?**

Just because a song isn't "positive" doesn't mean it isn't accurately reflecting the world God made. There is a lot of brokenness in our lives. Honest art will reflect that brokenness without

always needing to resolve it right away. In the same way that people who are going through extreme grief don't need easy answers, we sometimes need songs that express our questions or sorrow and then let us sit with that tension. Songs also don't always need to say something explicitly theological. God's world is wide. There are many truths that music can reveal that don't directly mention God or the gospel. That's why many music critics claim Kendrick Lamar or Chance the Rapper as "[prophetic voices](#)" even though their lyrics contain profane language.

### **3. How is the song communicating what it's saying?**

It's possible for one musician to write lyrics and set them to music in a particular way and for a different musician to take the **same** lyrics and set them to music in a way that changes the meaning of the song. Take as an example the song "Hurt," first written by Trent Reznor of the band Nine Inch Nails. Johnny Cash covered "Hurt" shortly before his death and also created a [music video for the song](#). The lyrics in the two versions are identical, except for where Cash replaced an expletive that was in the original. If you read the lyrics to "Hurt," they express pain, despair, and loss. The singer is fruitlessly turning to drugs to alleviate his grief. He talks about his own brokenness and his inability to save himself, as well as his grief at the separation that occurs between people as time passes.

Is this song "bad" because it doesn't have a "Christian message"? We would argue not. It honestly depicts real pain that people throughout the world go through. But because of the difference in its sound and tone, Johnny Cash's version comes across as less angry (and less creepy), as well as more sorrowful and reflective. His rendition is arguably more redemptive because (taken with the music video) it points to the emptiness of finding ultimate meaning in fame, money, and people, all while subtly pointing toward Christ.

### **4. Why are you listening to it?**

This question is an important one. Are you listening to your music in order to focus on cleaning the house? Are you using it to enhance the time you're spending with your friends? Are you using it to distract yourself from your life? Are you trying to validate your anger? Are you wallowing in self-pity?

Take sad songs. We've made a big point that it's important to listen to music that honestly reflects life. But if you're someone who struggles with depression, it's probably unwise to spend most of your time listening to depressing songs. One woman we know really loves a band whose overall sound and lyrics are distinctively melancholy. She does her best to be aware of her moods and only listens to this band when she is in an emotionally healthy place. If she is feeling sad, she doesn't listen to that band's music. If she has been listening to them for a while and notices that she's starting to feel gloomier, she stops.

Or consider the song "[Take Me to Church](#)" by Hozier. The lyrics are clearly anti-Christian in that the song uses religious language to promote worshiping a relationship. But we know someone who listens to this song in order to understand the perspective of people who reject God. This is a very different mentality from that of someone who is carelessly dwelling on the ideas in the song and just wants to be entertained.

### **5. Do you have any music made by Christians in your musical diet?**

We know some Christian young adults who are so disillusioned with Christian music that they have rejected it entirely. They listen to music almost all the time, and all of it is "secular." We know we just spent a lot of time making the argument that much of the music that non-Christians create is valid. But we think there is an equally strong argument for Christians to include worship music as at least some of the music they regularly consume. The reason why is that music disciplines our imaginations. It's not wise to constantly consume music that shows

us a world absent of God—even if that music does portray other truths about the world. There are many Christian artists who are making music that is both artistically good and that points listeners to God. And because of how accessible music is now, it's much easier to find such artists than it's ever been before.

## —— **What if my son or daughter listens to music 24/7?**

If teens keep their earbuds in all day and night, this habit doesn't necessarily indicate any particular issue or problem (although don't ignore your parental instincts if you suspect something is wrong). It's definitely worth asking what kind of music your kids are dwelling on day in and day out if they are listening to music so often.

But apart from the actual musical content, willingly giving up habits we enjoy for a period of time helps us to be less dependent on them. The Bible encourages Christians to practice fasting from food, and there are many benefits to fasting in other ways. If we are unwilling to give something up, we demonstrate that we value it more highly than we value what God wants for us. What's more, Americans tend to be rather poor at slowing down, being still, and being comfortable with silence. Challenge your teens to practice having times of silence in their daily lives. Help them not to be afraid of being still and being quiet. If they are uncomfortable with silence, help them to explore why they feel this way.

## —— **So most kids are streaming music these days. What streaming services are out there, and what do they do?**

**Spotify.** Offering unlimited access to a huge assortment of music and playlists, Spotify is quickly becoming the most-used streaming service in the world. A free account allows listeners to play any specific artist, album, or playlist via web-player or app. The free version requires mobile users to listen to tracks shuffled at random and includes ads at various points. Paying for a premium account allows users to have ad-free, offline access.

**Google Play Music.** Google Play Music is a combo music store and hosting service (like a cloud player) that offers an amazingly wide variety of artists, albums, genres, and tracks. Listeners can upload their own music collections and sync them along with the tracks available through the service itself. Google Play crams playlists with ads, much more than Spotify does, but the ads disappear if you have a subscription.

**Pandora.** Pandora provides an experience more similar to that of radio, allowing users to create customized stations that adjust to the listeners' preferences as users rate each track. Upgrading to Pandora's paid service improves sound quality, diminishes interruptions, and lets listeners customize the look of their radio stations on their devices.

**Amazon Prime Music.** Amazon Prime Music requires a Prime subscription, and offers listeners access to more than a million tracks, all ad-free, as well as allowing the purchase of tracks and albums. Amazon Prime's selection of music is actually fairly limited. To get access to a wider

range of music, users have to pay a separate monthly fee (available whether or not they have Amazon Prime) for Amazon's Music Unlimited service.

**YouTube.** When you use it on a desktop, you can go to [YouTube's Music page](#) and browse videos and playlists in various genres and themes. On mobile, you can download the YouTube Music app and listen to music for free with ads, or you can get YouTube Red and listen ad-free for \$9.99/month. YouTube Music [has a focus on video](#) that other streaming services do not and also provides access to an extensive amount of "unofficial" music.

**Apple Music.** Apple Music offers a 3-month free trial and then requires users to pay for a subscription. Users get access to millions of songs on- or offline along with ad-free streaming. While its model is somewhat similar to that of Spotify, Apple Music does offer a wide variety of artists, some of whom are not on Spotify.

Check out [this article from Lifewire](#) for info on other popular music streaming apps.

**Illegal online downloads.** A full [third of all Internet users](#) confess to "stream ripping" music—the term for using a website or program to download streamed tracks to a personal device without permission. [Over half of millennials](#) stream online content illegally and the majority of them don't feel guilty about doing so, even if they acknowledge it is wrong. We won't mention these piracy programs specifically—after all, we don't want them to get any press—but they're not hard to find, especially if a friend already knows how to access them. And regardless of whether we think certain musicians deserve the amount of money they earn, music piracy is inarguably *stealing*. What's more, music piracy programs make a computer or device susceptible to malware and viruses. If our teens are stealing music off the Internet, we as parents must address this habit and prevent it as much as we can.

## — My children show an interest in music (they sing or want to play an instrument). Should I help them get better at it, or is it just a distraction from more important things?

You should encourage any interest your children or teens show in music-making. They don't have to become professional musicians to benefit. The best studies show that smart kids make music and that [music makes kids smarter](#). The advantages of pursuing music include [improved language development](#), the brain working more efficiently, increased social competency, increased IQ, better spatial-temporal skills, better test scores, improved concentration and memory recall, and stronger self-discipline.

The director of your local middle or high school music program is probably your best source of information on student musicianship. This person typically knows which music stores in town work well with new music-makers and can point parents to the best deals on instrument rentals, instruction books, private lessons, and gear. Plus, band directors are always thrilled for kids to join their programs, even on a part-time basis, and often keep a variety of instruments students can borrow for free.

The band director might even be willing to talk to your children and help them decide which music form best suits their personalities and interests. For example, a girl with a shy demeanor

might enjoy playing the clarinet more than the trumpet, and a boy who enjoys the Gorillaz might prefer the jazz band to the wind ensemble. In any case, get behind any kids who want to make music, and help them experiment with different forms. Then provide a place, a time, and permission to practice often. Praise their endeavors and accomplishments, rather than their natural abilities. And ultimately, encourage their creativity! If the music that's currently available makes you sad, it could be because the music industry needs more Christians—like your kids!—who make good art for the glory of God.

## — So in a practical sense, how can I steward my teens' love of music?

Chicago clinical psychologist Dr. Don Elligan noticed his teen clients would come to his office dressed in clothing reflecting hip-hop culture and would recite rap music lyrics during their sessions. After a bit of research, he discovered those lyrics were, for his patients, “the single most important metaphor for their challenges, conflicts, and fantasies.” He continued to analyze the relationship those lyrics had with the issues dogging his young clients and found great success in using their music to connect and communicate with them. In his book [Rap Therapy](#), Elligan says, “It can be seen as a place of strength rather than as...promoting negative behaviors and beliefs. . . .(It) is often overlooked and not utilized by those working with (teens) to promote positive change in their lives.”

Stanford psychologist [Carol Dweck says](#) all parental advice can be distilled into two essential points: 1. Pay attention to what your children stare at; and 2. Praise them for their efforts. In other words, notice when they fall in love, and help them to use the energy of that love wisely.

Here are a few practical helps for parents and their music-loving teens:

- 1. Do some homework.** You can examine most popular song lyrics with a simple online search (we recommend [genius.com](#) for the explanatory annotations). Pay attention to your kids' playlists; streaming services often keep accessible records of listening history. Read music reviews (Common Sense Media has some on its [music channel](#), including suggestions for age-appropriateness). Watch music award shows, read about the highest-selling tracks or artists, and ask other parents or teens about their preferences. These strategies can give you important insights as well as background information for conversations about music choices and culture. Bear in mind that there is so much music out there that familiarizing yourself with popular music will only get you so far. Your best bet is to learn what in particular **your** children like.
- 2. Listen with them.** When driving your kids to school, taking them to practice, or going on the annual road trip to grandma's house, allow your kids to play their music in the car. You might not enjoy their music that much, but listening with them is a great way to find out what they listen to and what streaming services they use. As [Common Sense Media puts it](#), “Not only will you get a better idea of what they're being exposed to, but you may also improve your relationship with them.” You might even find you enjoy your teens' music!
- 3. Ask questions.** “*What do you enjoy most about this? Where did you first hear this song? Do your friends like this music, too? Why do they like it? What does this song mean to you? Would you ever think about doing what this song says to do? What do you listen to when you're happy, sad, angry, frustrated, lonely, working, playing, at school, in the car, etc.?*” Teach your kids to be critical

thinkers when it comes to music and other media influences. Doing so can mitigate your worries about what enters your children's psyches untested. The values you demonstrate daily in your household can protect your teens from the inside out—a **strategy that is much more effective than trying to prevent harm from the outside in**. Exchange judgment for curiosity, exhibit interest rather than condemnation, and use specific comments instead of generalizations, e.g., "I like the music in this song, but the words kind of bother me..."

4. **Use music as a starting point for spiritual conversation.** Music is an inherently spiritual art with just as much power for positive influence as for negative. So music and lyrics are great opportunities for faith illustrations, even when those lyrics exalt sin or unhealthy behavior. Some artists even write popular songs in irony, purposefully calling out wrong behavior and motives by at first seeming to glorify them (like J Cole's "[ATM](#)"). When we point to a popular song to explain something spiritually important, we reach into our kids' world in a unique way and speak their language to them. Christian author and speaker [Sean McDowell says](#), "Sometimes we need to critique culture, and other times we need to show how Christ is within culture. But using cultural examples of theology not only makes theology interesting to students, it also helps them make connections from their theology to the 'real' world."
5. **Watch the volume level.** Teens love to listen to their music loud, but acoustic trauma is real. The [American Academy of Pediatrics says](#) that one in six adolescents has "high frequency hearing loss" caused by exposure to loud noises. According to Dr. Joseph F. Hagan, Jr., "'If it hurts, there's a reason it hurts. Turn it down. If your ears feel funny afterwards, you had it on too loud.' As a dad, I used to say to my own kids, 'If I can hear it, it's too loud.'"
6. **Apply limits.** Clearly state and enforce music limits in your household, even as you recognize that it's impossible to control your kids' listening 100%. If you want to observe or inspect playlists and history, let your teens know what you're going to do. Sneaking around only creates mistrust and encourages your teens to also sneak around. Be firm, but keep the music conversation open. Instead of saying, "I'm not going to let you to listen to that. Period," consider starting with a few of the questions suggested above. Let them explain why they like their music. It's possible that your kids have been listening to a song or artist without much thought. They might surprise you and agree that some of their music is harmful. If your kids persist in listening to music of which you disapprove, maintain the boundaries that you can. You can say, "I know I can't stop you from listening to that, but it's not happening in this house, in the car, in my presence, when we have visitors, etc." It's important to let your kids know what you do and don't like about that music. By explaining your point of view, **you place a voice in their minds and hearts other than the music itself**. Your kids might choose to rebel against you for the moment, but the Holy Spirit can use your guidance to convict them later.
7. **Act immediately if danger signs show up.** It's important that you consider whether your children's music allows them to release anger or frustration in a healthy way or whether they're relying on their music to deal with trauma, guilt, grief, disillusionment, or even clinical disorders such as depression or anxiety. If you observe any of the following behaviors in your teens, consider seeking professional help:
  - Listening to violent, angry music and lyrics exclusive of any other type or genre for extended periods of time without a break.
  - Acting out with poor behavior, poor coping skills, or inappropriate language linked in any way to their music choices.
  - Hiding or sneaking their music listening or refusing to allow reasonable checks on their

habits.

- Becoming agitated during or after listening.
- Becoming inordinately angry, frustrated, or antisocial when unable to listen (say, because of chores, homework, family events, previously agreed-upon limits, etc.).
- Relationship difficulties (at home, at school, with peers, at church).
- Anxiety, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or symptoms of major depression (see our parent guide on this topic).

## Final thoughts

Growing teens need boundaries, but they also need to learn how to make their own decisions. Even when they complain that you don't understand them, your teens really do crave your guidance. But it's crucial that you communicate with patience, love, good listening skills, and a willingness to learn from them. Your kids' music choices do not reflect the world's influence so much as they reflect your children's personalities, desires, and struggles. If you are willing, music can be a powerful way of learning who they are, connecting with them, and helping them grow.

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