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TIPPER GORE

RAISING PG KIDS IN AN X-Rated SOCIETY

1987

Abingdon Press • Nashville

Introduction

Like many parents of my generation, I grew up listening to rock music and loving it, watching television and being entertained by it. I still enjoy both. But something has happened since the days of "Twist and Shout" and "I Love Lucy."

This is a book about the kinds of violent and explicit messages our children are receiving through the media and what we as parents can do about it.

I decided to get involved because I began to see the kinds of record lyrics that my children were being exposed to. It shocked me and made me angry. I started looking deeper into the problem, and became even more concerned.

A small but immensely successful minority of performers have pioneered the "porn rock" phenomenon. A Judas Priest song about oral sex at gunpoint sold two million copies. So did Mötley Crüe's album *Shout at the Devil*, with lyrics like: "Not a woman, but a whore/I can taste the hate/Well, now I'm killing you/Watch your face turning blue."[1] Sheena Easton's "Sugar Walls," about female sexual arousal, was an

even bigger hit on Top 40 radio stations. And Prince peddled more than ten million copies of *Purple Rain*, which included a song about a young girl masturbating in a hotel lobby.

This kind of rock music is only part of an escalating trend toward the use of more explicit sex and graphic violence in entertainment industry offerings, from movies and videos to jeans and perfume ads. Music is the most unexpected medium, and rock music has shown perhaps the least willingness to exercise self-restraint.

But in virtually every medium, the communications industry offers increasingly explicit images of sex and violence to younger and younger children. In the course of my work, I've encountered a degree of callousness toward children that I never imagined existed. No one asks what is in the product or its effect on kids, only how well it will sell.

The dilemma for society is how to preserve personal and family values in a nation of diverse tastes. Tensions exist in any free society. But the freedom we enjoy rests on a foundation of individual liberty and shared moral values. Even as the shifting structure of the family and other social changes disrupt old patterns, we must reassert our values through individual and community action. People of all political persuasions—conservatives, moderates, and liberals alike—need to dedicate themselves once again to preserving the moral foundation of our society.

Censorship is not the answer. In the long run, our only hope is for more information and awareness, so that citizens and communities can fight back against

market exploitation and find practical means for restoring individual choice and control.

As parents and as consumers, we have the right and the power to pressure the entertainment industry to respond to our needs. Americans, after all, should insist that every corporate giant—whether it produces chemicals or records—accept responsibility for what it produces.

Let me apologize in advance for the profane language and disturbing images that appear throughout this book. These examples are used to expose the material for what it is. I believe that the current excesses could not and would not have developed if more people had been aware of them. Unfortunately, many parents remain unaware of the indecent liberties some entertainers take with their children. Perhaps full disclosure will stir parents to try to stop the wholesale exploitation of American youth.

More than anything else, I want this book to be a call to arms for American parents. I want to offer them the very real hope that we can reassert some control over the cultural environment in which our children are raised.

Tipper Gore
Carthage, Tennessee

1

A Mother Takes a Stand

You say that things are getting out of hand. This is an inflammatory statement. . . . Rock and roll has always meant sex. . . . But maybe it's not fucking that you're against; maybe it's just masturbation that you find offensive.

—rock singer Wendy O. Williams[1]

As the fatigue from the day's events settled in, while I waited at LaGuardia Airport, I couldn't stop my mind from replaying the hostile confrontation I had just experienced. Now I was alone in New York City, stranded by stormy weather. This was one of the worst nights of my life.

I had just endured three hours of verbal attacks from angry rock stars and other recording artists. The New York Chapter of the National Association of Recording Arts & Sciences (NARAS), which presents the coveted Grammy Awards, had invited me to represent the Parents' Music Resource Center in a panel on explicit lyrics. I knew that some songwriters and performers in NARAS did not especially appreciate our views, but they needed to hear how a number of consumers feel about certain musicians' products. I thought I could help them understand our concerns.

I never had a chance. The panel included record producer Bob Porter, jazz artist Mtume, and punk rock singer Wendy O. Williams, in a T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Eat Your Honey." The

audience consisted of a business associate of the rock group Twisted Sister, punk rockers sporting purple mohawk haircuts and T-shirts bearing the logo for the heavy metal band Venom, and a few quiet NARAS officials. Every question, for almost three hours, was aimed at me. Many were highly personal and insulting. No doubt about it—I had been set up.

I suggested to the panel that parents have a right to know what their children are buying and hearing. Wendy O. Williams, a Grammy nominee, replied that I was upset about these songs simply because I can't handle the possibility that my own child might masturbate. "When is it all right for a child to masturbate . . . Mrs. Gore?" she asked.

Ms. Williams obviously considered me a neurotic Washington housewife who dislikes sex. She proceeded to read from the Song of Solomon and *Twelfth Night*. It almost seemed worth the pain to hear a woman who sings songs like "(Work That Muscle) F**K That Booty" recite the Bible and Shakespeare.

How could these people, prominent in their fields, be so insensitive? Perhaps naïvely, I had expected reasonable people to spiritedly disagree. But it never occurred to me that record industry officials would be a party to such tasteless personal attacks. Nor did I imagine that the people who play a role in awarding Grammys would refuse to take explicit lyrics seriously. If these are the folks who hand out the music awards, no wonder we're having problems.

As the panel concluded, a woman asked if I would have accepted the invitation had I known that everyone was going to be against me. "Yes," I

answered as calmly as I could, "I am pleased to discuss the issue—and to exercise my First Amendment rights."

I rushed to the airport, only to learn that all flights to Washington had been canceled. I had never felt so alone. It had been a long and hard day, and I was angry and perplexed. I longed for the familiarity, love, and comfort of home! How had I gotten myself into this situation?

FORMATION OF THE PMRC

I had become aware of the emergence of explicit and violent images in the world of music several months earlier, through my children. In December 1984, I purchased Prince's best-selling album *Purple Rain* for my eleven-year-old daughter. I had seen Prince on the cover of magazines, and I knew that he was the biggest pop idol in years. My daughter wanted his album because she had heard the single "Let's Go Crazy" on the radio. But when we brought the album home, put it on our stereo, and listened to it together, we heard the words to another song, "Darling Nikki": "I knew a girl named Nikki/Guess [you] could say she was a sex fiend/I met her in a hotel lobby/Masturbating with a magazine."[2] The song went on and on, in a similar manner. I couldn't believe my ears! The vulgar lyrics embarrassed both of us. At first, I was stunned—then I got mad! Millions of Americans were buying *Purple Rain* with no idea what to expect. Thousands of parents were giving the album to their children—many even younger than my daughter.

Around that time, my two younger daughters, ages six and eight, began asking me about things they had seen on MTV, the music video channel on cable television. I had always thought that videos had great potential as a dramatic new art form, but I had not watched many. I began watching more often, and I observed that several included adult (or at least "mature") themes and images. "Mom, why is the teacher taking off her clothes?" my six-year-old asked, after watching Van Halen's *Hot for Teacher,* in which a "teacher" does a striptease act for the boys in her class.

I sat down with my kids and watched videos like Mötley Crüe's *Looks That Kill,* with scantily clad women being captured and imprisoned in cages by a studded-leather–clad male band. In *Photograph,* by Def Leppard, we saw a dead woman tied up with barbed wire. The Scorpions' *Rock You Like a Hurricane* showed a man tied to the walls of a torture chamber and a singer being choked by a woman.[3] These images frightened my children; they frightened *me*! The graphic sex and the violence were too much for us to handle.

Other parents were experiencing the same rude awakening. One day in early 1985, my friend Susan Baker came by to talk about her concerns. Susan and her husband, U.S. Treasury Secretary James Baker, have eight children. She told me that two of her friends were getting ready to take action on the issue of pornographic and violent images in music, and asked if I would be interested in signing a letter inviting others to a meeting to hear more about the excesses in some rock music.

I was so angry about the songs my children and I had heard that I quickly agreed to join Susan Baker in doing something about it. Susan was working with Sally Nevius, a former dean of admissions at Mount Vernon College in Washington. Sally and her husband, the former chairman of the District of Columbia City Council, had an eleven-year-old daughter. Also assisting Susan Baker was Pam Howar, a businesswoman with a seven-year-old daughter.

We decided to establish the nonprofit Parents' Music Resource Center, to be known as the PMRC. In May of 1985, we set out to alert other parents in our community. Sally arranged for Jeff Ling, a former rock musician who is now a youth minister at a suburban Virginia church, to give a slide presentation graphically illustrating the worst excesses in rock music, from lyrics to concert performances to rock magazines aimed at the teenage market. We invited the public, community leaders, our friends (some of whom hold public office), and representatives of the music industry. Our hope was to generate a discussion of the issue, raise public awareness, and begin a dialogue with people in the industry. To our surprise, more than 350 people showed up at our first meeting on May 15, 1985, at St. Columba's Church in Washington, D.C.

To my knowledge, no music industry representatives attended this meeting, with one very important exception: Eddie Fritts, president of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), unable to attend himself, had sent his wife, Martha Dale Fritts, and two NAB staff members. They brought with them a

letter that Mr. Fritts had just written and sent to eight hundred group station owners, which alerted them to growing concern among the public over "porn rock":

> The lyrics of some recent rock records and the tone of their related music videos are fast becoming a matter of public debate. The subject has drawn national attention through articles in publications like *Newsweek* and *USA Today* and feature reports on TV programs like "Good Morning, America."
>
> Many state that they are extremely troubled by the sexually explicit and violent language of some of today's songs. . . .
>
> The pre-teen and teen audiences are heavy listeners, viewers and buyers of rock music. In some communities, like Washington, D.C., parents and other interested citizens are organizing to see what they can do about the music in question, which at least one writer has dubbed "porn rock."
>
> I wanted you, as one of the leaders in the broadcasting industry, to be aware of this situation. . . .
>
> It is, of course, up to each broadcast licensee to make its own decisions as to the manner in which it carries out its programming responsibilities under the Communications Act.

Two weeks later, Mr. Fritts wrote to the heads of forty-five major record companies:

> At its May meeting, NAB's Executive Committee asked that I write you to request that all recordings made available to broadcasters in the future be accompanied by copies of the songs' lyrics. It appears that providing this material to broadcasters would place very little burden on the recording industry,

> while greatly assisting the decision making of broadcast management and programming staffs.

Eddie Fritts has a keen sense of corporate responsibility. He and his wife also have teenagers at home. Many station owners and programmers share his concerns. In June 1985, the industry newspaper *Radio and Records* reported: "Record industry officials declined comment, but radio programmers spotchecked by *R&R* this week generally welcomed the NAB's suggestion that record companies enclose written lyrics with records to help stations detect sexually explicit or violent wordings that may be inappropriate for their audiences." The story quoted Guy Zapoleon of Phoenix, who said: "I think it's an excellent idea. We have a responsibility to our audience to watch the wordings on songs. Without wanting to sound prudish, I think we owe it to the public to be careful."[4]

Record companies were not so excited. Lenny Waronker, president of Warner Brothers Records (Prince's label), rejected the NAB request to include lyrics. "It smells of censorship," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Rock and roll over the years has always had these little . . . furors. Radio stations can make their own decisions about what they want to play." A representative of one local station, the sometimes controversial KROQ-FM in Pasadena, California, agreed: "It's freedom of choice. The music is the beat; the lyrics come secondary. . . . We make our money on sex, from A to Z. It's what sells."[5]

Considering the initial NAB response, we were off to a good start, but what should we do next? How

could we make ourselves heard by the giants of the record industry, like Warner Brothers, Capitol, and RCA?

A SECRET ALLY

By happy chance, we gained an ally in the recording industry who could help us find our way through the music business. Throughout the ensuing campaign, he gave us invaluable advice—on the condition that he never be identified.

Our secret ally held an important position in the record industry. Like us, he was sickened and disgusted by the trend toward pornography and violence in some rock music. He advised us to set up a meeting with Stan Gortikov at the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the trade group that represents all major record companies. Gortikov had been president of the RIAA since 1972, and before that he had headed Capitol Records. He agreed to meet with us in early June.

Our strategy was simple. We felt it was crucial to publicize the excesses in song lyrics and videos, the source of our concern. We were convinced that most parents are either unaware of the trends in rock music, or uncertain what to do about them. We decided to get the word out and build a consumer movement to put pressure on the industry. From the start, we recognized that the only solution would involve some voluntary action on the part of the industry. We wanted industry leaders to assume direct corporate responsibility for their products. The problem was to persuade an industry profiting from excesses to exercise some self-restraint.

In 1984, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (the National PTA) had called on record companies to label their products for sexual content, violence, and profanity, in order to inform parents about inappropriate materials. The PTA had written to thirty-two record companies but had only received three responses. And those refused to discuss the issue further. Our ally advised us not to deal with the companies on an individual basis.

He suggested that we present our plans to the RIAA's Gortikov and not leave him any choice. Our source said the best way to catch the industry's attention was on the airwaves. So the PRMC launched a grass-roots media campaign that soon took on a life of its own.

FROM NEWS STORY TO NATIONAL ISSUE

From June to November 1985, we held dozens of meetings, participated in frequent conference calls, and exchanged numerous letters, as we sought solutions palatable to the industry and to the National PTA and the PMRC. As our negotiations intensified, the issue quickly became a national one.

Media coverage of the campaign included well over 150 newspaper columns, editorials, and radio stories about the porn rock issue. Ellen Goodman, William Raspberry, George Will, Charles Krauthammer, William Shannon, Judy Mann, Mike Royko, David Gergen, and many other syndicated columnists wrote favorable reviews. Reuter's North European Service carried stories, while the BBC did separate radio and TV interviews with Susan Baker and me. *The Economist* of London, the *Wall Street Journal*,

U.S. News & World Report, Esquire, Newsweek, Newsday, The New Republic, the *New York Times,* the *Los Angeles Times,* and *USA Today* all ran stories. Most were supportive. "The difference between the music of yesteryear and that of today is the leap one makes from swimsuits in *Sports Illustrated* to the centerfolds of *Hustler,*" David Gergen wrote in *U.S. News & World Report.* "If an album were X-rated, most radio stations and video programs would drop the worst offenders."[6]

The media campaign took care of itself. A small story about our first public meeting appeared in the "Style" section of the *Washington Post.* Before we knew it, we were besieged with requests for interviews. Kandy Stroud, a journalist, musician, and mother of three, had earlier written a "My Turn" column entitled "Stop Pornographic Rock" for the May 6, 1985, edition of *Newsweek.* She immediately received an invitation to appear on "Good Morning, America." Kandy and Pam Howar appeared on "Panorama," a Washington television show. Soon after that, I did an hour-long radio talk show in Oklahoma City, and Susan Baker and Sally Nevius participated in a similar show in another state.

News of the PMRC's fight to alert the public to porn rock spread quickly. The women of the PMRC collectively did hundreds of interviews on radio and television and for magazines and newspapers across the country and around the world. The "Donahue Show," "Today," "CBS Morning News," PBS's "Late Night America," all three networks' evening news shows, "Entertainment Tonight," "Hour Magazine," and many others picked up the story.

Meanwhile, Mr. Gortikov of the RIAA gave us a crash course on the recording industry. In a meeting with the PRMC in June 1985, he explained that the companies in the RIAA sell 85 percent of the recorded music in America. While the industry had considered a rating system, he said it would be too difficult to administer. The movie industry rates about 350 new films a year; the recording industry produces some 25,000 songs and 2,500 albums annually. Gortikov insisted that most recorded music was positive, despite the many "indefensible" examples of "plain bad taste." We assured him that we had no complaint about most rock and roll music, but that something had to be done about the vast commercial excesses.

Gortikov said his hands were tied, but offered to "do my best to exercise persuasion with the record companies; in my correspondence I will start to heighten awareness."

BATTLING "THE WASHINGTON WIVES"

In August, a middle-aged rocker named Frank Zappa, who enjoys a dedicated following, emerged as the record industry spokesperson chosen to confront the PMRC. Zappa labeled us "the Washington wives," and (my personal favorite) "cultural terrorists." He summarized his arguments in *Cash Box* magazine:

> No person married to or related to a government official should be permitted to waste the nation's time on ill-conceived housewife hobby projects such as this.

> The PMRC's case is totally without merit, based on a hodge-podge of fundamentalist frogwash and illogical conclusions.[7]

He was not the only one to surface in opposition to the PMRC. With a cry of "Censorship!" Danny Goldberg, president of Gold Mountain Records, formed Musical Majority, which enlisted the help of artists like Daryl Hall and John Cougar Mellencamp. While the Musical Majority defended artists' rights, the PMRC raised questions about the rights of others. What about the right of parents to protect their children? What about the right of citizens not to be bombarded with explicit material in the public domain?

Our opponents tried to dismiss us with sexist comments about housewives trading on their husbands' influence. But they failed to realize that we spoke for millions of other parents who shared these same concerns and who would not be dismissed out of hand.

THE CENSORSHIP SMOKESCREEN

The PMRC proposed a unique mechanism to increase consumer choice in the marketplace instead of limiting it. Our approach was the direct opposite of censorship. We called for more information, not less. We did not advocate a ban of even the most offensive albums or tapes. We simply urged that the consumer be forewarned through the use of warning labels and/or printed lyrics visible on the outside packaging of music products. Critics used the smokescreen of censorship to dodge the real issue, which was lack of

any corporate responsibility for the impact their products may have on young people.

The PMRC sought to balance the precious right of artistic free speech with the right of parents to protect their children from explicit messages that they are not mature enough to understand or deal with. These two rights are not mutually exclusive and one should not be sacrificed for the other. Records, tapes, and videos are consumer products, mass-produced, distributed, and marketed to the public. Children and parents of children constitute the bulk of that consuming public.

The PMRC and the National PTA have agreed that these musical products should enjoy all the rights and privileges guaranteed by the First Amendment. But as Thomas Jefferson once said, when excesses occur, the best guarantee of free speech is *more* speech, not less. That's all we asked for—awareness and disclosure. Our proposal amounted to nothing more than truth-in-packaging, a time-honored principle in our free-enterprise system.

In this information age, such consumer information gives parents an important tool for making choices for their children. Without it, parental guidance in the matter of available entertainment is virtually impossible. The PMRC proposal does *not* infringe on the First Amendment. It does *not* raise a constitutional issue. But it *does* seek to reform marketing practices by asking for better and more informative packaging. And it *does* seek to inform consumers when artistic expression borders on what legendary singer Smokey Robinson has called "musical pornography."[8]

Who decides which songs are musical pornography? Only the record company can make that decision—not the government, as some would have us believe, and not an outside censorship board, as others have charged. The music industry, which allowed these excesses to develop, would be asked to take responsibility for the product it markets to the public.

In fact, we are talking about products primarily written for children, marketed to children, and sold to children. In this country we rightly treat children differently from adults; most people feel that children should not enjoy the same access to adult material as adults. Children are not allowed into R-rated movies if they are under seventeen. In most places, minors are not allowed to buy *Playboy* and *Penthouse* or go into adult bookstores.

If no one under eighteen can buy *Penthouse* magazine, why should children be subjected to explicit album covers and lyrics that are even worse? If we have decided it is not in the best interest of society to allow children into X-rated bookstores, why should they be subjected to hard-core porn in the local record shop? A recent album from the Dead Kennedys band contained a graphic poster of multiple erect penises penetrating vaginas. Where's the difference?

In the hands of a few warped artists, their brand of rock music has become a Trojan Horse, rolling explicit sex and violence into our homes. This ruse made us gasp at the cynicism of the recording company executives who control the music business. They found it easy to confuse the issue by

throwing out cries of censorship while refusing to address the real problem. They dodged the real point—that in a free society we can affirm the First Amendment and also protect the rights of children and adults who seek to avoid the twisted tyranny of explicitness in the public domain.

PROPOSING ALTERNATIVES TO THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

At a second meeting with the RIAA's Stan Gortikov, on May 31, 1985, we presented a letter to him signed by sixteen wives of United States representatives and senators:

> It is our concern that some of the music which the recording industry sells today increasingly portrays explicit sex and violence, and glorifies the use of drugs and alcohol. It is indiscriminately available to persons of any age through record stores and the media.
>
> These messages reach young children and early teenagers at a crucial age when they are developing lifelong value systems. Their minds are often not yet discerning enough to reject the destructive influences and anti-social behaviour engendered by what they hear and see in these products.
>
> Because of the excesses that exist in the music industry today, we petition the industry to exercise voluntary self-restraint perhaps by developing guidelines and/or a rating system, such as that of the movie industry, for use by parents in order to protect our younger children from such mature themes.

Braced with this letter, Mr. Gortikov pledged to work swiftly within the music industry.

Over the next few months, we negotiated several alternatives with the RIAA. We began by asking for a categorical rating system based on content, then suggested using the symbol "R" to designate explicit albums. Finally, we joined forces with the National PTA and its 5.8 million members. Together with the RIAA we called for a consumer warning label on explicit or violent albums or for full disclosure of lyrics. "We recommend this course of action because we believe it protects consumers by providing them with valuable information while respecting recording artists' First Amendment rights," said National PTA president Ann Kahn.[9]

Pam Howar of the PMRC urged the industry to "create a uniform standard to be used to define what constitutes blatant, explicit lyric content."[10] We thought the ideal solution would be a label (or some symbol) to advise the consumer about explicit lyrics in a particular album. Printed lyrics would also enable the consumer to make an informed decision appropriate for their child's age. Since most albums would not concern parents, there had to be some way to flag those that might.

As our critics were quick to note, some album covers are explicit enough in themselves to show they are unsuitable for children. But many albums with inoffensive covers include explicit lyrics. We suggested distributing a master lyric sheet to all retail stores, but Gortikov said there would be too many outlets to cover and keep up to date. It seemed that the only solution was to attach the lyric sheet directly to the product. We wondered if sheets of explicit and violent lyrics might actually attract

children. But the National PTA's Ann Kahn insisted that it would be best to address explicit lyrics with more openness, not less. That approach seems to best balance artists' right of free expression with consumers' right to know what they are buying.

While we were calling publicly for consumer warning labels on albums containing explicit lyrics, and for an industry panel to set guidelines defining explicit material, we worked feverishly behind the scenes to obtain industry endorsement of a uniform standard—one written by the industry itself, not by us. The standard would loosely define what constituted blatantly explicit lyric content. Meanwhile, the Musical Majority and others lined up pop stars to blast "music censorship" and the women who would "ban rock and roll." Our ally in the industry had warned us that we would be no match for prominent artists calling us "censoring prudes" or worse, as industry leaders fought to protect the status quo and their economic interests.

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THE SENATE HEARING

By this time, the United States Congress had begun to take an interest in the issue, and many members considered holding hearings. In September 1985, Senator John Danforth of Missouri scheduled a hearing before the Senate's commerce committee, which he chaired. The commerce committee has jurisdiction over communications issues, and wanted to investigate the prevalence of pornographic, violent rock lyrics for its own information—not to consider any legislation.

The hearing put me in an awkward position because my husband, Albert Gore, Jr., was a freshman member of the commerce committee. Some critics mistakenly assumed that he had asked for the hearing, when in fact, both he and I had had reservations about it. I thought the PMRC would be better off working with artists and the industry on their own terms, instead of dragging everybody before the TV cameras on Capitol Hill. Artists were already screaming about censorship, and this would only give them an excuse to raise the specter of government intervention.

However, our industry source welcomed the idea. In his view, it would take congressional attention to make the record industry budge. His only regret was that Senator Danforth let the executives know in advance that no legislation would come out of it.

In any event, the September 19 hearing certainly brought the issue out for public debate. It turned out to be the most widely publicized media event in

congressional history. A seat in the hearing room was the hottest ticket in town all year.

Both sides turned out in force. Susan Baker and I testified for the PMRC, and Jeff Ling gave his slide show. The National PTA also sent representatives who testified. Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider of Twisted Sister also appeared.

The hearing did not seek to reach any consensus, but on the whole we were pleased to see the facts come out. Twisted Sister's Dee Snider told the committee that he was a Christian who did not smoke, drink, or do drugs, and insisted that he had been unfairly accused. A member of the committee—my husband—asked him the full name of his fan club, SMF Fans of Twisted Sister. Replied Snider, "It stands for Sick Mother Fucking Fans of Twisted Sister."[11]

AGREEMENT WITH THE RIAA

After the Senate hearing, the negotiations produced results that all parties felt represented a workable and fair arrangement. We decided to make a major compromise—to accept the formation of an RIAA policy statement on explicit lyrics, and drop our request for a uniform standard of what is or is not explicit. We would also drop our request for an R rating on albums or tapes to designate explicit products, in exchange for the warning "Explicit Lyrics—Parental Advisory." We agreed to give the compromise a chance to work in the marketplace, and to monitor it jointly and assess its effectiveness a year later. We also agreed to cease the media

campaign for one year. On November 1, 1985, the RIAA, the National PTA, and the PMRC jointly announced the agreement at the National Press Club in Washington.

The critics, of course, weren't finished. I became the victim of harsh and often tasteless attacks. Someone sent me a copy of *SPIN*, a music magazine published by Bob Guccione, Jr., and financed by his father, the publisher of *Penthouse.*[12] It contained a satirical article entitled "Tipper Gore's Diary," which detailed all the songs I would ban before or after lunch. The article eventually raised itself to the level of a personal pornographic attack, by alluding in rather uncivilized terms to my sexual relations with my husband.[13] *Hustler*, a pornographic magazine, also crowned me "Asshole of the Month."

"KIDS CAN'T WRITE LETTERS LIKE THESE"

In the midst of this rather frenzied activity my third-grade daughter, Kristin, came into my room one evening and said, "Oh, Mom, we made some man really mad that we wrote him letters."

"Oh," I said, at this point thoroughly prepared for almost anything (or so I thought).

"Yeah, really mad, he called up the school and everything."

I said, "Kristin, will you ask your teacher to call me when it's convenient?"

The next day the school principal told me what had happened. The phone had rung and an angry voice had demanded to speak to the principal. "I'm from the National Association of Broadcasters and I want

to know the meaning of these letters! (This was not NAB president Eddie Fritts; it was a staff member. In fact, Mr. Fritts later wrote a lovely letter to the children.) The caller had continued: "I don't believe that kids could write letters like these! Some teacher must have put 'em up to it. Kid's couldn't know about these things!" The principal described him as ranting and raving.

Actually the children of this third-grade class had read a lead story in their newspaper, the *Scholastic News*, about the record rating issue. The author invited them to write down their feelings and thoughts about the issue and send them to officials.[14] The teacher had asked Kristin to see if I would come in one morning and answer their questions. I did. Their questions were very good, covering the whole range of concerns, from the artists' rights to the raunch and violence in some songs and videos to what their parents and siblings thought and did about such media exposure. These tuned-in kids then wrote very sensible letters.

The man from the NAB apparently didn't know that eight-year-olds listen to the radio, watch rock videos, and can think and express themselves remarkably well. In fact, they often make more sense on this issue than many adults—and they are polite. It is fascinating to hear them discuss in their own words what they hear and see, because they clearly perceive the sex, the explicitness of some of the images and words, and they are very aware of the extreme violence of some of the videos. They call the merger of violence and sex "yucky" and "gross."

Ironically, the NAB man was unaware that a New

York disc jockey has called MTV a seductive "Sesame Street" teaching all the wrong values.[15] He must have also missed Ellen Goodman's column on the little "Wanna Be's,"—eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds who copy Madonna right down to the lace bra.[16] He also missed Dee Snider's statement in a teen fan magazine about greeting the increasingly younger fans of his band, Twisted Sister, with "Alright you sick motherfuckers, if you're ready to kick some ass, we're Twisted-fuckin'-Sister!"[17]

Apparently the man from the NAB missed the fact that Twisted Sister is so popular with youngsters tuned into MTV that MTV had offered a day with Dee Snider as a prize in a "Back to School" contest they sponsored. I didn't discuss such things with the third graders. I didn't have to introduce them to Twisted Sister. They already knew about that group, and Mötley Crüe, and Judas Priest.

"Someone must have talked to them," the NAB man said, "someone must have put them up to this."

"Well, Mrs. Gore's daughter is in the class and Mrs. Gore did speak to them," the principal explained; "we encourage our children to get involved and to learn how to be good citizens."

That really set him off. "He is really angry at you," the principal told me. "He said something about an agreement on November 1 and these letters were dated November 15 and you weren't supposed to discuss this anymore." She paused. "He said the issue has been settled."

Talk about reverence for the First Amendment! Talk about censorship! This man from the National Association of Broadcasters raved at my daughter's

school principal because I had violated some imagined gag order in answering the questions of third graders who were in the pursuit of knowledge. What a turn of events. But he didn't stop there. He asked the principal if the parents knew that their children were writing such letters. They had used words like "sex" and "no clothes" and "violence." "I'm sure their parents wouldn't want them to write these letters," he had said.

MAKING COMMUNITY FEELINGS RESPECTED

During October and November of 1985, the New York-based Simmons Market Research Bureau surveyed the nation on the issue of rating records. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed agreed there should be a rating system. Additionally, 80 percent wanted the lyrics visible on the outside of the albums or tapes, where they can be read.[18] And the censorship charge didn't stand up to scrutiny.

I felt particularly gratified when the president of the American Civil Liberties Union, Norman Dorsen, and Harriet Pilpel, co-chair of the National Coalition Against Censorship, praised the Parents' Music Resource Center on July 4, 1986, at the Liberty Conference in New York City. The *New York Times* said of my presentation:

> The cofounder of the Parent's Music Resource Center, Tipper Gore, got a warm response for her group's effort to get record companies to identify on record jackets the sexually explicit lyrics inside.
>
> The civil libertarians present liked her approach of relying on community pressures rather than legal

constraints; of asking not that any record be banned but only that parents be given an opportunity to discover before a purchase was made what their children were buying. [Mrs.] Gore seemed to have found a means of making community feelings respected in a way that also respected the First Amendment.[19]

2

Where Have All the Children Gone?

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

—St. Paul, I Corinthians 13:11

Kids are really sophisticated now. They don't need to be sheltered. Little girls wanna be fucked, teenagers, little boys, they wanna fuck. They do!

—Paul Rutherford of the band Frankie Goes to Hollywood[1]

In the debate over explicit materials, some people tend to treat children simply as miniature adults, with mature reasoning powers and critical thinking skills. Adults sometimes forget that children are psychologically unique and have special vulnerabilities and evolving capabilities that change dramatically during successive stages of development and maturation.

Only a few years ago, it was thought that newborns couldn't see or focus their eyes. Now we know that not only can they see, they express a clear preference for certain colors and patterns. Parenting books such as those developed by the Gesell Institute talk about the fears that are prevalent among two-year-olds. These fears change at four, at six, at eight, and at twelve. We should keep that in mind as we examine media presentations for children.

One set of parents told me that their four-year-old had nightmares for a week after watching the music video *Thriller* (which shows Michael Jackson turning into a monster, frightening his girl friend, and joining

graveyard ghouls in a great dance routine that older teens love). They didn't know what was the matter, because their child couldn't explain what she saw. Teenagers in the family had watched the video with her. They thought it was funny, but she was terrified and the frightening images lodged in her mind.

Researchers have confirmed what attentive observers of child behavior have known all along: Most children develop emotionally, intellectually, physically, and cognitively according to a certain timetable and along a clearly recognizable path. There is, for example, a specific age in middle childhood when children develop the skills of moral reasoning. Young children don't recognize the conceptual difference between truth and lies until around five years of age. The conscience isn't fully developed and operational until age eight. During these early years of rapid growth and development, children are intimately dependent upon the parents who will be their primary influences until they reach legal adulthood, which our society confers at eighteen. Unfortunately, in our society parents all too often receive very little education about this most important responsibility.

Parents are children's primary advocates and defenders. It is important to convey to the child that support will always be there and that love will not be conditional. At the same time, parents must enforce limits and provide discipline. A structure of loving discipline, limits, and standards of behavior are essential to the child's well-being. We all need to understand more about the mental growth and development of our children. They deserve better than to be treated like miniature adults.

Every child needs the security of knowing where the boundary lines are. He or she will test them at two, again at four, and again at fourteen and sixteen, all in different ways. At each age the loving parent must make adjustments, but continue to provide the security of definable boundaries.

The more parents know about the mind of the child, the better they can protect and nurture the child. Children five and under generally cannot distinguish fantasy from reality on television or in stories. They will be able to tell the difference only when their brains are ready. Teenagers are more complex. They begin to look and talk like adults as early as thirteen, but they are still *children in transition* who need as much time as younger kids.

The teen years are turning points in young lives. Teenagers are endowed with the emotions, passions, and physical capabilities of adults, without the adult judgment to harness them. Because of the pressures they face, they may need even more "quality time" from parents. Teens look to their parents for a moral compass—values and ethical advice they can apply to romances and friendships.

When the teen quest for independence begins, conscientious parents will know their children well enough to give them only as much freedom as they can handle.

The two main stages in adolescence are the struggle for identity, which goes through many cycles and ideally is resolved in the early twenties, and the development of sexual relationships. The developing teen experiences complex physical longings and extremely strong emotions of all kinds.

Teenagers are learning about their bodies, which are undergoing tremendous transformations, their sexuality, and their personalities and how they affect others. They are impressionable, and are especially subject to pressures and temptations from their friends.

Adults should strive to alleviate some of the intense pressures teenagers must face. At a time when they are emotionally unsettled, teens are struggling to cope with a legion of problems: relationships with parents, siblings, and peers; the use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; sex, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy; respect for and rebellion against authority; a continuing search for self-identity; questions of faith and personal religious commitment; schoolwork, part-time jobs, and the future. Those are more choices than most adults would care to make.

So anyone who attempts to debate the porn rock issue as if young people are in the same intellectual and emotional category as adults does them a terrible injustice. We need to let children be children. Children think differently from adults, and process information according to their own stages of development. Consequently, adults must not overlook the exaggerated impact that violent and explicit images can have on children, or forget that children are different.

THE CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURE

Children have always been uniquely vulnerable. But they are even more vulnerable in today's society,

for two reasons. Children are now bombarded with explicit messages on a scale unlike anything our culture has ever seen. And American families are undergoing profound changes that are depriving millions of children of the support structure they once enjoyed. As Robert Coles, an author and child psychiatrist at Harvard University, has observed: "If strong family or church life is absent, what other moral influences are there? Children take what they see in movies to be the adult world in operation—they tell you that."[2]

The traditional image of the smiling nuclear family with both parents at home and close relatives nearby now represents less than 7 percent of American families.

A decade from now, the majority of seventeen-year-olds will come from broken homes. The number of families maintained by women alone grew almost

Steve Kelley, The San Diego Union