



words *matter*

By Caryn Sullivan

Culture: Pushing Back Against the Grind

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This fall there has been a lot of buzz in my world about a trend of which I had been oblivious – “grinding” at high school dances. The discussion followed controversial decisions by school administrators striving to limit a dance floor activity that, to adult observers, looks an awful lot like sex with one’s clothes on, but to some teens, is just the way they dance. Grinding, it seems, is a manifestation of a systemic problem: the denigration of our culture, observable in distasteful music, dance, television programming, and movies.

Aside from chaperones, most parents have likely never seen their offspring grind, so they have no image to attach to my words. Rest assured, the extreme form of this provocative dance style is not an image suitable for the breakfast table.

The unenlightened adult need only turn on MTV to watch dance videos that belong on adult channels (if anywhere) but cater to teens, and objectify females with their lyrics and provocative dance moves. One of many portals into teenagers’ minds, MTV connects them with the latest songs and teaches them how to shake their booty on the dance floor. Radio stations also play the songs, often with profanity, racial epithets, and references to sex, drugs, and violence bleeped out. Fans download unedited versions onto their iPods and listen with ear buds, so adults are tuned out while they are tuned in. YouTube enables virtually anyone to share music, dance moves, or comedy routines with little accounting for taste.

I’ve borne witness to both sides of the battle over dance, music, and entertainment, from Michael Jackson to Saturday Night Fever, Beverly Hills 90210 and South Park. I’ve observed the influx of new influences and how they raise eyebrows and blood pressure of the seasoned members of society, many of whom had their own moves and favored cutting-edge music, back in the day. Many of us who are parenting teens came of age during the disco years and know that music and dance are the icing on life’s cake. Why, then, are we concerned about the current crop of teens?

The pendulum continues to swing too far, permitting increasingly relaxed moral standards, at the same time that ubiquitous technology creates a cloud in which communication flows unmonitored. When our first teenager, now 28, was in high school, we worried about the influence of popular TV shows like “Friends,” which portrayed a lackadaisical change-your-partner, sleep-with-friends lifestyle.

A decade later, standards have degenerated to a shockingly low level. Networks offer today's teens shows such as "Gossip Girls" in which unsupervised, under-age Manhattan trust fund snobs have sex and drink martinis. TIVO, the Internet, and TVs in bedrooms make it easy for kids to watch these shows 24/7, and difficult for parents to know they are doing so.

Not that long ago, teens talked on telephones tethered to the wall. It was easy enough for parents to remain within earshot to pick up scraps of useful information. With the advent of MySpace, cyberspace infiltrated the family room, changing communication forever. Kids developed cryptic shortcuts so they could have rapid-fire cyber conversations of which parents were oblivious. In the blink of an eye, Facebook and cell phones, password protected, added another layer to the barrier, virtually impossible for parents to infiltrate innocuously. As one silent technology after another has cruised into our homes, users have become shielded from inquisitive eyes and ears. As a result, parents too often find themselves occupying partially obstructed-view seats in the theater of teen life.

So how can adults push back against unsavory influences, as well as move from the cheap seats to the front of the theater? Grinding provides a useful example. I envision a multi-generational grind-a-thon in a church basement in which young men show their dads how they dance oh so close behind girls, leaving little daylight between female posteriors and male private parts. Surely, grinding fans would be willing to teach their fun-loving parents their moves, for it's really no big deal, right? In fact, it is so harmless that grandparents and clergy might want to attend as well. Kids can help mom and dad hone their moves while they watch.

Is that angst I hear? Teens, don't be shy. If you think grinding is great, own it! On the other hand, youth of America, if you cannot fathom the thought of mom and dad grinding on the church floor, then perhaps you now have a glimmer of appreciation for why adults do consider grinding to be a big deal. Maybe you now understand why dads are aghast at the thought of some pimple-faced punk rubbing up against his little girl, who can't even drive yet. If the grind-a-thon visual causes junior to hurl his Cheerios or his "woman" to worry that grandma might have a stroke, then perhaps we have broken through the bubble in which some of today's teens reside.

Good taste is important, even in a society increasingly reluctant to pass judgment or set limits. While cultural and technological influences are powerful, they need not be omnipotent; nor should we allow them to hijack family values. With this issue on the radar, parents may be motivated to dig in against external influences that stream into our homes on the electronic highway. We can take a lesson from our teens, masters at pushing back against limits, and push back ourselves. While not easy, this one is a battle worth waging.