

Something Magical Happened When My Autistic 10-Year-Old Started Listening To Eminem

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Illustration: Damon Dahlen/HuffPost; Photos: Getty

“I step back and listen to the music with a 10-year-old’s ears. Magical four-letter-wordplay.”

My 10-year-old son starts to rap after someone on YouTube says Eminem is autistic.

“I don’t know if Eminem is autistic or not,” I tell him. “YouTube says lots of things.”

“He looks worried all the time.” He tilts his head, holding the worn-out headphones in place. “He writes exactly what I think.”

“He writes about stapling his teacher’s testicles to the desk,” I say.

“I love him,” my son says. “But the radio edits make me nervous. I wait for the empty spaces, and this bad feeling builds inside me, knowing they’re coming and just waiting for

them.”

Suspense in any form is unbearable. He shivers and opens and shuts his hands: fists to flat palms and back. Over and over until I place my hands on his.

“Don’t tell your dad.”

I download the explicit albums. Graphic sexual acts and abuse and drugs he has never heard of. To my relief, he barely notices the actual content. He just loves profanity. Every “fuck” makes him chuckle.

“If you teach your little sisters any of this, I’m deleting the albums,” I warn him.

“Hee hee!” he cackles, as Tommy Lee whoops Pamela’s ass. “I used to think it just meant donkey!”

Is it still misogyny if the listener is unaware of the context? I do not bring up girlfriends locked in trunks or wives getting murdered. I step back and listen to the music with a 10-year-old’s ears. Magical four-letter-wordplay.

My son hears himself in these lyrics. The isolation, anger and frustration about authority figures and expectations, about who and what is acceptable — about what it means to deserve love or even basic acceptance. The message is wrapped in clever rhyme schemes that he can touch and manipulate. It distances itself from his overloaded heart with its playfulness, allowing him to think and feel without becoming frozen by panic. It allows him to talk about his experience, even in day-to-day interactions.

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“Read me one of your poems,” I say.

My son’s raps follow the exact same rhythmic patterns as Eminem’s, but he creates his own themes and poorly spelled word combinations:

*Geomitry’s answers are defe-dently not forbidden
and you can trust me when I say that there truth is not hidden.*

The confines of an established, successful form give him the confidence to explore his own world. He shares his new words at school and the teachers love this new hobby — at first. His classroom assistant has him sign her cellphone case.

He begins to think, learn and demonstrate knowledge in rhyme more often than not. He bursts out in math with long verses about angles and the formulas for area and perimeter, and before long his classroom teacher is torn between admiration and irritation. He is smarter than her other students. He is also louder.

"That was very good," she says. "But can we share at the end of the day?"

"Wait I have one more!"

I get daily emails. *Your son cannot stop rapping. I need your son to stop rapping. I admire your son's commitment to rapping, but it is very difficult to teach the parts of a plant cell while someone is loudly rapping about mitochondria in the back of the classroom.*

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"Poetry is my special interest right now, Mom. You're a writer. You should understand."

"Yes, but I don't yell out passages from my novel while your teacher is explaining the differences between a cell wall and a cell membrane."

"I drop subject-appropriate rhymes. I'm listening and learning, and she's mad?"

This is a valid point.

"There are rules we follow in school." I cringe as I say this. I am also a teacher, but it's different when it's your own kid.

A grunt. He walks over and sits down in front of his laptop. He opens it, cracks his knuckles like he saw Snoopy do in a Charlie Brown cartoon years ago, and starts tapping at the keys. I tap at my own across from him, sneaking peeks as he alternates between grimaces and smiles. Listening to him mutter, pounding on his backspace button, revealing an imagination I thought he didn't have. An imagination he never disclosed until he started writing.

He will not be able to rap his way into college, or even into receiving an invitation to sit at the lunch table with the other boys in his class. ... But this is my son communicating, sharing what he knows and feels with the world around him instead of holding it inside, and it's this music that was the catalyst.

After 45 minutes, I have written half of a chapter that I will probably throw away. It's garbage. My son prints a page and hands it to me, whispering along over my shoulder as I read expertly rhyming lines about small-minded teachers and mothers who stand up for free speech. He writes jokes within the lines, utilizing the sarcasm he struggles to understand in real-time discussions, expressing himself through words that he cannot say out loud unless he has written them down first.

"You should write my novel for me," I complain.

"No, Mom. That's your special interest. I can't wait to see your book on the library shelf. I will bring all my friends over and point to it, and say *my mom wrote that.*"

I do not cry.

“Then I’ll write a rap about you, just like Eminem does about his mom!”

Wait a minute.

A wild laugh, head thrown back, and he takes off up the stairs. Rhyming love–insults fly over his shoulders toward me. His laptop held tightly to his chest.

He will not be able to rap his way into college, or even into receiving an invitation to sit at the lunch table with the other boys in his class. And I wish he’d picked almost any other artist — at least for now — to emulate and idolize. But this is my son communicating, sharing what he knows and feels with the world around him instead of holding it inside, and it’s this music that was the catalyst.

Will we need to have a larger conversation about these songs and their meaning at some point? Do I worry about him internalizing messages that a 10-year-old doesn’t have the tools to deconstruct?

Yes.

But I also know that my son has learned that there is power in telling his story. He sees others listening to and understanding his words, and his desire to speak and share — to interact with the world — grows in turn. The last six months of him rapping have changed his mindset, which is no small thing for an autistic child. Together, my son and Eminem built a bridge. I will enjoy every moment of him walking across it, my ears burning, my son’s heart on brilliant, rhyming display.

Hannah Grieco is an education and disability advocate and writer in Washington, D.C. Her work has appeared in The Washington Post’s “On Parenting,” Motherly, Arlington Magazine, Lunch Ticket, Hobart Pulp and more.