

A Parent's Guide to

K-POP & BTS

axis

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More than any other international music industry, K-pop has been strategically designed to earworm its way into your brain — and to elevate South Korea and its culture onto the world stage.

—Aja Romano, [Vox](#)

A Parent's Guide to **K-POP & BTS**

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Across the pond

On February 9th, 1964, the Beatles came crashing into the United States on the Ed Sullivan Show, and [73 million people](#) tuned in to what is now known as a [historical moment](#). If the performance itself wasn't electrifying enough, it now signifies one of the first mass hysterias in American pop culture revolving around non-Americans. Since then, boy bands have come and gone from near and far, boasting a diverse range of catchy music and cute hairstyles, reveling in young love or lamenting the loss of it.

On May 21, 2017, another such boy band took the stage at the American Music Awards. With youthful faces and exciting clothes and hairstyles, they [performed](#) a high-energy song with an even higher-energy crowd, much like the frenzied atmosphere witnessed 53 years prior on the Ed Sullivan show. What's also similar? This group of boys is not American, or even North American, or even from the western hemisphere. This boy band, a K-pop act from South Korea, calls themselves BTS. And though they don't perform with instruments or even sing songs in English, today's teens are just as head-over-heels for them as you might've been with a boy band from yesteryear.

And BTS is just the beginning. K-pop is experiencing a massive explosion in popularity all over the world. Fans (often teenagers) are extremely knowledgeable of and devoted to their favorite artists, expending a lot of energy and time toward staying updated. We understand it may not make much sense (in some ways quite literally), so this Parent Guide will help you not get lost in translation and even use your teenager's interests to connect more deeply with them.

What is K-pop?

It's short for Korean pop, a musical genre that [originated in South Korea](#). Mainstream K-pop music combines elements of [many genres](#), including electronic, hip-hop, rock, and R&B. In addition, it utilizes [multiple melodies](#) that are intended to be incredibly [catchy](#). There are male and female K-pop groups, but no groups currently have both male and female members.

Though K-pop wouldn't be a thing without the music, its overall appeal is also due

to lots of other factors, including impressive [choreography](#), social media engagement, merchandise marketing, and unique [concepts and themes](#) within music releases and videos. Of course, the physical attractiveness of the singers and the typical [boy band boy-craziness](#) are also hugely important.

How many people are in each group?

Nowadays, K-pop groups vary widely in the number of members, ranging anywhere [from 4](#) to up to [21 members](#). While each group is different, there are some consistent [reasons](#) why they have more members than some of their western counterparts.

The most obvious reason for multiple members is marketing. The more members in a group, the easier it is for agencies to build [fanbases](#) around the individual members, as well as the group as a whole. This idea translates well when it comes to selling merchandise. K-pop albums usually come in [bundles](#) with randomly distributed photos and posters of individual members, meaning fans might have to buy multiple copies in order to get items with their “[bias](#)” (their favorite member). The same goes for [clothing](#) and other [accessories](#).

Unlike groups in the U.S., K-pop groups *aren't* formed by friends getting together in a garage to start a band; instead, they're formed very intentionally by Korean [trainee systems](#). These systems serve as a school of sorts for aspiring K-pop stars, and once someone is deemed “ready” (which could take anywhere from a few months to several years), they get put into a group and begin to prepare for their debut. Though the regimens are extremely [intense](#), there are still plenty of young people dying to make it big, giving the agencies huge pools of talent to choose from when forming groups.

Another reason for having many members is South Korea's strict [conscription law](#), which requires every male citizen to serve 2 years in the military sometime between the ages of 18 and 28. While famous athletes and classical musicians are [exempt](#) from enlisting, K-pop artists are not included in this exception. Because of this, more members in a group allows for the group to continue performing even when a couple of their members [might be away](#) serving their time.

Finally, K-pop members exist not only within their group as a whole, but also within

role-specific subgroups (also called “lines” or “sub-units”). There can be sub-units designated for rappers, singers, the best dancers, or any other quality that sets certain members apart from others. The more members in a K-pop group, the easier it is for them to form sub-units and come up with more branding and content for the group as a whole. The group [NCT](#) is a great example of this. With up to 21 members at different times, they have been able to have multiple sub-units that have even branched off and formed different groups.

Why do the men wear makeup?

If you think about male musicians wearing makeup, you may picture rockstars like [Alice Cooper](#) or [KISS](#), who used extreme makeup to completely change their faces for the sake of their acts. This use of makeup—to alter one’s face—has traditionally been the entirety of why men would choose to wear it. However, male K-pop groups are challenging this norm, using makeup in the same way women do: to enhance their natural appearance.

South Korea [accounts for](#) 20% of the world market for men’s cosmetics. Appearance is very important in South Korean culture in general, with almost every job application [requiring a headshot](#) along with a resume. The country is also well known for its [high per-capita rate](#) of plastic surgery. Because of all this, Korean men tend to embrace appearance enhancements because more attractiveness could lead to more success.

Before we completely dismiss this practice as weird or effeminate, it’s important to understand that it has a history. The South Korean pretty boy or “[flower boy](#)” image originated as early as the 6th century. During that time, the “[hwarang](#)” became a state-sponsored organization for the education of an elite group of young men. With the intent of producing the best of the best of future leaders, these young men studied religion, martial arts, ethics, and nationalism, all with a pledge of loyalty to their families, their state, and each other. They would typically meet in the most naturally beautiful and sacred areas to not only study, but sing and dance as well. In these times, the boys would wear makeup on their faces and jeweled shoes on their feet. Due to the elite status of this group, their practices have continued to affect South Korean culture and are part of why modern Korean men have embraced makeup as a culturally and

historically “manly” part of their lives.

Now, male K-pop stars are [at the helm](#) of reinvigorating this tradition. Hair, eyes, and lips are enhanced or colored, and the skin is usually doctored to appear soft and moist. Along with cultural standards, another reason for doing this is to stand out on stage or in videos. Again, for them, more attractiveness is correlated with more success. So unlike in the U.S. where makeup on men is widely considered strange and effeminate, it’s much more culturally accepted for South Korean men to wear it.

How does my teen even know about K-pop?

It has to do with a phenomenon that’s been dubbed “[Hallyu](#),” or the “Korean wave.” Essentially, it’s the spread of South Korean culture across the world, and it began in the ‘90s when some Korean films and TV shows began reaching Asian audiences beyond the country’s borders. It kept spreading farther and farther, eventually making its way to the U.S. in the 2010s, most notably with PSY’s odd breakout hit song, “[Gangnam Style](#).” In the years following, K-pop has been arguably the most influential part of Korean culture to gain prominence in America, and it’s only increasing.

Two of the main contributors to K-pop’s popularity are music streaming and social media. Those of us who are a bit, ahem, *older* might remember when the only way to hear about new music was to flip through the records, tapes, or CDs at the store, to hear it on the radio, or by word of mouth. Nowadays, listeners have access to music from any time period and any place around the world at their fingertips, and there are algorithms constantly suggesting new songs and artists based on what one has already listened to. This has allowed Gen Z (who [listens to more diverse music](#) than any prior generation) to not only have the opportunity to discover music from all over the world, but also to share it with others effortlessly and quickly.

K-pop stars have utilized social media to their advantage as well. It’s not only been one of the main ways Americans have heard about K-pop, but also how they learn about, connect with, and build an appreciation for South Korean culture overall. BTS especially has successfully utilized Twitter to engage with fans all around the world—more successfully, even, than most western pop stars. To illustrate: [In 2018](#), Justin Bieber had about 390,000 Twitter engagements (mentions) in one recorded week. In

that same week, BTS had over *36 million*. The group even holds the Guinness World Record for most retweets.

So even though K-pop isn't dominating news headlines, it's all over the internet, with a lot of help from numerous fan accounts that also [rack up millions](#) of followers. These accounts are run by the fans and dedicated to giving news updates, promoting the group, supporting them, and keeping others informed on how to do so as well—*all on a 24-hour cycle*. In this age of music streaming, more recognition can directly lead to more commercial success, higher chart placement, and more award nominations.

[V Live](#), a Korean live-streaming app, has also helped. K-pop stars use the platform to connect with their fans by live-streaming or uploading videos showing their daily lives. With the help of subtitles, people from all over the world can see and understand their favorite stars on a more personal level. And in a world where teens view their favorite artists as friends who get them, this goes a long way toward increasing K-pop's popularity.

Why do teens like it when it's not in English?

Each person's reasons for liking K-pop will be different, but there are some reasons why it has such mass appeal, even with foreign audiences.

As we mentioned before, K-pop is not afraid to incorporate aspects of multiple genres into a single song. It takes a lot of influence from American music, so it sounds very similar to the music teens are used to hearing every day. Because of this, there's something for everyone in K-pop music. The more mainstream groups tend to focus on elements of American hip-hop, electronic, and R&B, but there are still plenty of other niche artists that have different sounds as well (for example, [Day6](#) is more of a rock band, and [DEAN](#)'s music is very alternative R&B).

In addition, like other forms of pop, it's made to be widely appealing. K-pop songs tend to be overproduced (i.e. excessively uses audio effects, layering, and digital manipulation), high in energy, and written in predominantly major keys, all of which almost guarantees it will get stuck in your head and put you in a happy mood. As our teens hear and learn about all of the bad things going on in our world today, something happy sounding and

nonsensical might be a desired escape for them.

With any kind of music, it can be easy to get so lost in the energy or vibe of the song that though words are heard, they're not really consciously processed. So teenagers may not care if they can't sing along when the songs are just so darn catchy.

But let's not forget that even if the words aren't sung in English, they do have meaning, and they're usually translated into English online. So even if the song itself isn't comprehensible, teens can easily look up the translated lyrics and be impacted by them.

So who is BTS?

It's a 7-member K-pop [boy band from Seoul](#) that debuted in the [summer of 2013](#). Its members are RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook, and BTS stands for *banda sonyeondan*, which means “bulletproof boy scouts.” [J-Hope explained](#) that the name means to “block out stereotypes, criticisms, and expectations that aim on adolescents like bullets, to preserve the values and ideals of today's adolescents.” In 2017, they added that BTS was an initialism for “beyond the scene.” [Their record label](#), BigHit Entertainment, [further explained](#) that it symbolizes youth who avoid settling and make the decision to move forward to achieve growth.

Are they really that popular? Why am I just learning about them?

In a word, yes! Though K-pop is slowly but surely finding its place in American pop culture, no group has achieved as deep of an impact as BTS. In the past couple years alone, they've [spoken](#) at and [performed](#) for numerous American [talk shows](#) and media companies, including being [the first K-pop group](#) to perform on *Saturday Night Live*. They [won top social artist](#) for the past 3 years at the Billboard Music Awards (it was awarded to Justin Bieber from 2011-2016). Their two concert films *Burn the Stage* and *Bring the Soul* have broken box office records for the [highest grossing](#) event-cinema concert production and the [widest ever](#) event-cinema release, respectively. They were the first K-pop group to perform at a U.S. stadium—and it sold out [in minutes](#). And in

May 2019, [they became](#) the only group other than the Beatles to score 3 Billboard No. 1 albums in a single year.

A big reason that BTS has been able to achieve these successes and more in America than other K-pop groups haven't is their aforementioned label, BigHit Entertainment. Though an underdog compared to K-pop's "[Big 3](#)" labels, BigHit offers [a lot more freedom](#) to its artists. Not confined to the so-called "[slave contracts](#)" many other K-pop labels require their artists to sign, BTS is allowed to vacation and go home for emergencies. They're also allowed to miss things due to health issues or injuries. Because of these freedoms, the guys are able to always give their best at performances and in media coverage.

The guys also have a lot more say in their artistic direction, whether it's writing and producing their music or coming up with concepts and choreographies. This allows them to be expressive and honest, both of which are traits Gen Z looks for in artists.

Besides being huge on Twitter, they are dominant on YouTube. Their latest song "Boy With Luv" (definitely a [bop](#)) broke the previous YouTube record for most views in 24 hours *by* [over 20 million views](#) (interesting fact: 7 of the top 10 most-viewed-in-24-hours videos are by K-pop groups). In addition to music videos, BTS has been consistent in posting lots of [behind-the-scenes footage](#) of their lives. Most K-pop agencies [consider](#) personal social media presence a liability (because it's not curated or approved by the agencies), so the ability for BTS to give an honest, inside look on an almost constant basis has been a beneficial way for them to connect with fans all over the world, keeping them coming back for more. It also allows for fans to create [humorous compilations](#) that are also widely shared.

If you hadn't heard about them until recently, don't be surprised. Like most teen trends, which take awhile to become totally mainstream, K-pop is something that has been considered more niche up until recently. But because of BTS' success, and because K-pop doesn't sound all that different from American pop, it's begun entering everyone else's radar, too.

What do they sing about? Should I be concerned?

Like many boy bands, BTS sings a lot about love. Though none of the members [is said to be dating](#) at the time of this writing (their dating lives are kept very private in general), a theme of romance weaves its way through a majority of the BTS discography. That being said, they do talk about a lot of other things, too—they wouldn't be the top social artist for just singing about girls.

Earlier in their career, BTS used their songs to talk about the pressures that came with growing up in South Korea. Songs like “[No More Dream](#)” and “[N.O](#)” call out and question the pressures and expectations of the education system, challenging listeners to not conform and follow their own dreams. They addressed South Korean historical disasters and political scandals in the song “[Am I Wrong](#).” And tracks like “[Dope](#)” and “[Go Go](#)” are braggadocious, but also talk about the pitfalls of partying and living lavishly, and how hard work will lead to success and fulfillment in life.

In recent years, though, they've used their music to promote love and, more specifically, a love of self and for their fans. Their most recent [album trilogy](#) “Love Yourself” featured songs that promote messages of exactly that, with standout hits like “[IDOL](#)” and “[Fake Love](#)” reminding listeners that self-love must be present first in order to experience genuine love from others (BTS is not a religious group, so things like hard work and self-love are often put in places we know only God should be). Their most recent [mini-album](#) “[Map of the Soul: Persona](#)” really hones in on the theme of finding joy in the discovery and love of self, as well as appreciating the people you care about. Other [recent songs](#) like “[Magic Shop](#)” and “[HOME](#)” are odes to their fans, to whom they credit a lot of their success.

But they don't only promote these messages through their music. Last year, RM [gave a powerful speech](#) about love and empowerment at a United Nations meeting. After talking about his own struggles to find his place—both individually and as a part of BTS—he urged the youth to find their voice and speak:

Maybe I made a mistake yesterday, but yesterday's me is still me. I am who I am today, with all my faults. Tomorrow I might be a tiny bit wiser, and that's me, too. These faults and mistakes are what I am, making up the brightest stars in the constellation of my life. I have come to love myself for who I was, who I am, and

who I hope to become.

The group has even partnered with UNICEF to create the [Love Myself](#) campaign to combat violence toward children and teens around the world. Through donations and the hashtags [#ENDviolence](#) and [#BTSLoveMyself](#), the campaign has had global impact.

Of course, all of these things are worth talking with your K-pop fans about. Should the love of self be the end-all, be-all of our existence? Is success really the ultimate virtue? It's worth asking good questions about how their messages might sound good, but ultimately lead to emptiness and dysfunction because we were made for satisfaction in Christ alone.

So BTS has a strong fan base?

BTS fans call themselves the ARMY ([an acronym for](#) Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). Similar to [Beliebers](#) (Justin Bieber's fans), the [Beyhive](#) (Beyoncé's fans), and [Arianators](#) (Ariana Grande's fans), the ARMY is known for their undying fandom and loyalty to BTS. This ARMY is massive, diverse, loyal, and a big part of the [BTS experience](#). When BTS revealed their new logo in 2017, they even created a logo for the ARMY that geometrically connects with the BTS logo to [signify](#) how connected BTS is with their fans.

Many good things can be said about the ARMY, their support for BTS, and how they've helped BTS achieve success. But they have also started a lot of conversations about the dangers of "[stan](#)" (stalker + fan) culture and at what point being a fan becomes unhealthy and even dangerous.

For example, the ARMY has been known to camp (and we mean [camp](#)) outside venues for [days](#) and even [weeks](#) before a BTS performance to secure the best seats or tickets to see the group. They miss [school](#) and neglect their sleep and hygiene, usually without knowing if they'll actually get what they've been waiting for. Should they get in, they've also been known to [spend hundreds of dollars](#) on merchandise to prove their fanship. Rain or shine, day or night, fans are willing to go to extreme lengths for a chance to see the boys they idolize so much.

This stan culture is even more unhealthy and hateful on the internet. While long-time

fans of BTS [happily welcome](#) new fans to the ARMY, the internet has become a warzone for anyone who dares speak anything other than praise for them. In 2018, radio DJ Roman Kemp [was reported](#) for race discrimination by ARMY members for calling BTS music “noise,” and also received other [hateful comments](#) from them. A New York Post writer jokingly tweeted about how popular one of his tweets about BTS was getting, and numerous ARMY members [criticized him](#) for how “gross” and “disgusting” (among other things) it was for him to use BTS for his own personal gain. For many members of the ARMY, to not genuinely love BTS as much as they do immediately makes you an enemy. Yet, at the same time, many in the ARMY [claim to have received](#) hate speech against themselves from non-fans.

Though not every fan is like this, BTS certainly has its share of those who obsess over BTS and anything they do. ***We think it’s definitely a point of conversation to discuss with your teen about how celebrities are people just like everyone else, and how unhealthy it can be to pour your whole life into or make your whole identity revolve around a band who will eventually retire and lose their relevance in pop culture.***

How do I talk to my kids about K-pop when I don’t understand it or its appeal?

The first step to having a healthy conversation with your teen about anything they might be into is to take some time to learn about it. Even if you’ve never heard about K-pop before, it isn’t hard to find info (yay, internet!). Listening to some [songs](#), watching some [performances](#), and reading over these [terms](#) will help you get some context before even starting a discussion. Beyond that, a lot of the research has probably already been done for you by devoted fans. Just start searching for a group or a group member, and prepare to be overwhelmed!

It’s important to not let the different language become a reason for you to tune out. Even if it’s “weird” or you just don’t get it, chances are your teen has reasons besides the words for liking K-pop. If you enter the conversation with the intent to learn without prejudice, you’ll probably be able to learn a lot and your teen will enjoy being able to teach you things you didn’t know.

Remember that each child is unique and will have their own reason as to why they like something. You can do all the research you want, but that won't guarantee you know why it resonates with your teen. Ask them to show you some of their favorite videos or songs. Watch/listen with them, asking questions about their favorite members and why they like the song/video. Chances are a few simple questions will get them talking because it's something they care about.

You may not get it, or even like it, and that's ok! With social media and its way of creating a more personal and relational connection between artist and audience, **to question the art means to question the person who appreciates it**. Teens are incredibly sensitive to criticism, and as soon as your teen feels like you don't care about what they like, they feel threatened and are less likely to want to tell you more about it.

After this takes place, and your teen feels that you care about their world, you can begin discipling them, helping them analyze how K-pop affects them and if it has become a stumbling block or an idol in their lives. (For more on how to do this, we highly recommend our [Parent's Guide to Discipling Teenagers](#).)

Final thoughts

As different as K-pop may seem to us, it's likely become quite normal and accepted for our teens. Learning about it and staying engaged is the best way to have influence over them in this area. Let them tell you about their favorite song or their bias. Watch a livestream or a performance. And continue to ask thought-provoking questions that will help them keep their appreciation at a healthy level. K-pop stars and music may not be promoting a completely debauched lifestyle, but they are sending messages about what's important, what to pursue, and what to value. Your teenage fans need your wisdom and guidance to know what's worth listening to and what will keep them from experiencing the abundant life of Christ.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Gen Z's Love of Music](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Spotify](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Discipling Teenagers](#)
- Check out [axis.org](#) for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- [Kprofiles.com](#), anything and everything regarding any K-pop group and its members (probably more than you wanted to know)
- [Explained](#), Netflix docuseries featuring an episode exclusively on K-pop
- "[K-pop 101](#)," Refinery21 (article with definitions of popular K-pop terms)

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A Parent's Guide to **K-POP & BTS**

Recap

- K-pop is short for Korean pop, a musical genre that originated in South Korea. Mainstream K-pop music combines elements of many genres.
- While K-pop wouldn't be a thing without the music, its overall appeal is due to lots of other factors including choreography, social media engagement, and unique concepts and themes within music releases and videos.
- There are lots of members in each group because of more marketing opportunities, as well as cultural reasons, such as Korea's trainee systems and conscription laws.
- Male K-pop stars wear makeup and bright clothing because in Korea, the more attractive you are the better chance you have at being successful.
- "Hallyu" is a term that describes the growth of Korean culture's popularity across the world. Two of the main reasons K-pop has been able to have such prominence worldwide are the ability to stream music and social media.
- There could be a variety of reasons why your teen likes the music, but simply put, K-pop is usually just pretty catchy. K-pop is made to get stuck in your head and put you in a happy mood.
- BTS is a 7-member K-pop boy band from Seoul, South Korea. Though K-pop is slowly but surely finding its place in American pop culture, no group has achieved as much or had as deep of an impact as BTS.
- While romance weaves its way through BTS lyrics, they also are not afraid to talk about Korean social issues. They are big promoters of self-love and identity in their music and in their message as a group.
- BTS fans are called the ARMY, and along with being diverse and loyal, some have been known to be unhealthily obsessive about BTS and spread hate on the internet for those who are not fans of BTS.
- You may not understand or like K-pop, and that's ok! The best way to have discussions with your kids about it is by asking questions without prejudice and listening with an intent to learn, then asking thought-provoking questions once you've shown your child that you care.

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

A Parent's Guide to **K-POP & BTS**

Discussion Questions

- How did you find out about K-pop? What made you interested in it?
- What do you like about it? Is there anything you don't like about it?
- What are some of your favorite groups? Why do you like them? Do you have a favorite member? (If you're feeling brave, ask who their "bias" is instead)
- Do you focus on the music more, or things like the dancing and people in the groups themselves?
- Do you understand what they're saying? Have you looked up the lyrics? What do you think about them?
- Do you feel like you are learning more about Korean culture? Does that aspect interest you?
- At what point do you think someone is "too much" of a fan? Do you think you may be? Why do you think so?
- What do you want me to know about K-pop and why you like it? What do you think I am not understanding that you'd like me to?

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!