

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

Kendrick Lamar

axis

A Good Kid from a m.A.A.d. City

As one of the most prolific and influential music artists in the world, Kendrick Lamar is an enigma. Simultaneously beloved and highly controversial, his art and life continue to influence us, whether we realize it or not.

Despite his commercial success—his last four albums not only topped the Billboard charts, but also [earned him](#) seven Grammys, a Pulitzer Prize (the first ever awarded to a rap artist), and acclaim amongst hip-hop legends like Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre—his work continues to both entice and confuse Christian listeners. On the one hand, his social criticism, political awareness, cultural influence, and self-examination encapsulate reality so well, it's caused young people, especially urban youth, to claim him as [the voice of their generation](#). But on the other, the self-proclaimed Christian's lyrics are rife with sex, violence, drugs, vulgarities, and profanities.

So who really is Kendrick Lamar? Why is his voice and music so relevant to the current generation? And is it something we should be concerned about? How can parents engage in loving and biblical conversation with their Kendrick fans in a way that helps them to think deeper about what they listen to and whom they follow?

—— Who is Kendrick Lamar? What's his story?

[Kendrick Lamar Duckworth](#) was born in 1987 in an area of Los Angeles populated by gangs. He grew up in the Compton area, which is Blood territory and notoriously known as "[Bompton](#)" (for words that begin with "C," Bloods change it to a "B" to distinguish themselves from the Crips). His parents originated from Chicago, where his father was a member of the [Gangsta Disciples](#), a gang that conquered the Southside of Chicago. They decided to move to Compton with only [\\$500 in their pockets](#) in hopes of a better life. Unfortunately, they only traded gangs for poverty. The Duckworths lived in Section 8 housing, and with no education, the only jobs accessible to them were fast food joints or, in desperate moments, [hustling on the streets](#).

In spite of all this, Kendrick was a straight-A student and had hopes of playing college hoops. Though he wasn't a gang member himself, most of his close friends in high school were Bloods, and through his affiliation with them, he was often confronted by rival gangs and lived in a neighborhood where gunshots were the norm. He eventually converted to Christianity after a close friend was killed during a tragic altercation.

—— How did he become a rapper?

In elementary school, Kendrick started writing poetry at the encouragement of one of his teachers. Eventually, his words were tested among rap enthusiasts in the high school yard, where students would form a circle and take turns spitting their rhymes for crowd approval. Through those rap battles, Kendrick [was given the name K-Dot](#). K-Dot eventually signed with an independent record label, [Top Dawg Entertainment](#) (TDE), as a new artist and released several [mixtapes](#) that circulated throughout LA. The two albums under TDE that placed him on the map and catapulted him to mainstream fame were [Overly Dedicated](#) and [Section.80](#), both of which captured the attention of music producer Dr. Dre, [who signed him](#) with Aftermath and Interscope Records. Under this label, Kendrick has released 3 albums from 2012 to now, as well as [co-produced the soundtrack](#) to the 2018 Marvel blockbuster, [Black Panther](#).

— What influences him, his music, and his style?

The trials and tribulations of his upbringing saturate his music, providing inspiration for his albums, but he was also influenced by West Coast hip hop. (One of the first West Coast rappers came “[Straight Outta Compton](#)” [warning: strong language].) [N.W.A.](#) helped birth the controversial “gangsta rap” and was the first West Coast group to have a political voice. Kendrick was born shortly after their song “Boyz-n-the-Hood” was released. In addition, [Kendrick says](#) that the rapper who had the greatest influence on his music is Tupac. Lamar was eight years old and sitting on his father’s shoulders when he watched Tupac film the video for “California Love” in his neighborhood.

— So what does he rap about?

His three main albums are a collective dialogue with himself wrestling with faith, the realities he faced in Compton, the temptations and joys of fame, and his survivor’s guilt of escaping the hood while leaving his friends and family behind. Each album builds on these experiences. We’ll break down them.

good kid, m.A.A.d city

[This album](#) released in 2012 and is the real-life tale of a “good kid” (Kendrick) adapting to the hostile environment of gangs, drug abuse, crime, and poverty in a “m.A.A.d city” (Compton). The first six tracks deal with this “good kid” getting sucked into criminal activities and destructive behavior with his friends, which eventually leads to committing robbery, run-ins with the Crips, sex, and the death of a friend. But the album doesn’t glamorize the street life; rather, it illustrates its chaos and depression. Also, the album begins and ends with the prayer of salvation, first recited by a group of teenagers and later recited both by the teenagers and an older woman from the neighborhood. The album ultimately reminisces his conversion. [Kendrick revealed](#) in an interview with *Vanity Fair* that he was baptized twice, once when he was 16 (the age of the good kid in his album) and later in adulthood.

To Pimp a Butterfly

Due to the success of his first album, this [second album](#) (released in 2015) was highly anticipated. It deals with his survivor’s guilt, what it means to be a leader, and his frustration with becoming an urban hero while simultaneously feeling powerless to save his hometown. The sixth track, “[u](#),” unveils Kendrick’s battle with depression after hearing that three of his childhood friends were murdered, all in one summer. His frustration with being on tour performing while his friends were being buried, discovering his teen sister was pregnant, and reports concerning the Michael Brown trial and Ferguson put him in a very dark place.

But despair would turn to hope in the latter part of the album. He explores his leadership on the track “[i](#),” attempting to break up a gang fight and doing a freestyle to bring peace. The album’s title song is really asking the question, “How can I turn my success into something positive for my community—the urban community—to embrace?” In other words, how can he “pimp” this situation for good? (By “pimp” he means, that in the same way that street pimps manipulate and use women’s bodies for profit, how can he maneuver and utilize his celebrity status for something actually good?) On the final track, “[Mortal Man](#),” Kendrick recites a poem to his idol, Tupac, after having a fictional conversation with the deceased rapper. [The poem](#) [warning: strong language] talks about the relationship between the caterpillar and butterfly, which illuminates the album title further:

The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it. Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it, in order to protect itself from this mad city. While consuming its environment the caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive. One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him, but praises the butterfly. The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the

beauty within the caterpillar. But having a harsh outlook on life, the caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak. And figures out a way to pimp it to his own benefits. Already surrounded by this mad city, the caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon which institutionalizes him. He can no longer see past his own thoughts. He's trapped. When trapped inside these walls, certain ideas start to take root, such as going home and bringing back new concepts to this mad city. The result? Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant. Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations that the caterpillar never considered, ending the eternal struggle. Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same.

Despite all its vulgarities, this final track asks some tough questions and encapsulates a struggle that so many feel but never articulate.

DAMN.

All of this led to [DAMN.](#) (2017), which reaches deeper into the person of Kendrick, exploring the complexity of his inner struggles with faith, the evils from his upbringing that have latched onto his soul, and the current temptations of fame. As [one writer puts it](#):

We tend to cast our favorite artists in our own image. We were thrilled to find a rapper as principled, as wise, as honest, and as spiritually resonant as Kendrick Lamar, and we were quick to ascribe to him all of our own best ideas about life in these United States. For a while, Kendrick seemed to be playing along. He gave us albums that challenged and amazed us, but that still fit more or less comfortably into our neat fall/repentance/redemption narrative. But then he gave us DAMN.

Each track on the album deals with various aspects of who he is, both the good and bad, and [their titles](#) deal with different emotions and personal attributes, highlighting the tension within Kendrick himself (e.g. "HUMILITY.," "LOYALTY.," "PRIDE.," "LUST.,"). The final track, "DUCKWORTH.," details the true story of how TDE's CEO Anthony "Top Dawg" Tiffith contemplated robbing and potentially murdering Kendrick's father Kenny "Ducky" Duckworth at a Kentucky Fried Chicken in their neighborhood. His plan was thwarted by Ducky's generosity, and Kendrick views this story as divine providence, since Anthony would start the record label that eventually signed Ducky's eldest son and led him to music superstar success. He [concludes the song](#) [warning: strong language] with:

Twenty years later them same strangers, you make 'em meet again / Inside recording studios where they reaping their benefits / Then you start reminding them 'bout that chicken incident / Whoever thought the greatest rapper would be from coincidence? / Because if Anthony killed Ducky, Top Dawg could be servin' life / While I grew up without a father and die in a gunfight.

— All of this is really deep. Why is he so open and vulnerable in his music?

There are probably many different motivations, some of which we'll never know, but it seems that it's because he recognizes the impact of his music among urban millennials: [During an interview](#), Kendrick tells the story of three young girls who ran up to him after his concert in tears because they were so inspired by his music. *Section.80* and *good kid, m.A.A.d city* spoke to the realities of their struggles. [He's also said](#) that as he accepts his call as a leader for the younger generation, he must examine himself before challenging others. *DAMN.* is his (very public) confession of his sins and hope of salvation. Rather than simply singing about his coolness, riches, and fame, he has chosen to use his platform to make a difference.

All of this sheds even more light on our original question, "Who is Kendrick Lamar?" A young black man, raised in the m.A.A.d city of Compton, whose honest critique of himself, his community, the music industry, and even America as a whole speaks to the complexity

and confusion that plagues the postmodern generation. He also professes Christian faith and believes his gift and influence as an artist is a call from God. Kendrick [remarked in an interview](#) on the popular New York radio show, The Breakfast Club, that he feels like he has become “something like a preacher for young kids in the hood.” His music seeks hope in the midst of despair, a pursuit that the majority of young urban youth search for through entertainment, sports, luck, or, for very few, education.

— Wait. Aren't his lyrics explicit?

As we listen to Kendrick's music, we may start wondering about the explicit content, especially after reading the section above. How is he a “role model” or a “preacher” for younger generations?! And how can it be appropriate for us as Christians to listen to such profane lyrics?

Before answering these questions, we must remember his intended audience and the context from which his music emerges. For teenagers and young adults who grow up in places like Compton, the content of the lyrics are narrations of their daily experiences. *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* concerns the life of a teenage male in situations that may not be relatable to suburbanite youth: “[Kendrick tells](#) his own story to inspire others, emerging from the prison of institutional racism, pride, capitalism, survivor's guilt, and depression to offer hope and redemption to his neighbors back home.”

Therefore, for children growing up in these conditions, Lamar's music could be socially appropriate and even have a positive influence. To them, his music artistically displays the reality of the streets—the violence, drugs, alcoholism, and brutality that are everyday occurrences in every major city in America. Anger, frustration, depression, trauma, and hopelessness are all emotions contained in the soul of almost every urban youth.

Something we must consider: Is it possible that the profanity in Kendrick's lyrics are just him speaking the language of the community he wants to reach? Profanity is a normal part of life for people in those settings, regardless of if they're feeling hostile or calm, joyful or sad, high or sober. Parents within these contexts may have a very different conversation with their youth from those who live outside. For some parents, the appropriateness of the lyrics may be the least of their concerns.

For parents outside this context who are concerned about the appropriateness of the music, maybe the conversation starter could be: Why do you love his music? Perhaps they respect the honesty in his lyrics. Maybe seeing a kid from Compton become successful and attempting to utilize his influence for good speaks to their aspirations for their future: “If a guy from the street can become someone great, then maybe I can, too.” If our sons and daughters are listening to Kendrick's music, maybe the better approach is to understand why before having a conversation about the content.

And while this doesn't resolve the question of whether Christians should swear or not (our upcoming [Parent's Guide to Swearing](#) will address this!), one way to address this problem would be to first have a conversation with your kids about your position on swearing, then purchase the “clean” version of his albums for them to listen to. (**Note:** We don't think this is a good solution for all artists who have profanities in their music because simply getting rid of certain words doesn't also eliminate all of the terrible ideas that are present. But Kendrick addresses many real-world issues and wrestles openly with what many of us struggle with, all while looking to Christ for his ultimate foundation—albeit imperfectly—which is needed in Christendom today.)

— Is he really a Christian then?

It might seem like a harsh question, but it's a valid one. Doesn't the continued use of profanity in his lyrics reveal an unrepentant heart? As we talk about Kendrick and his music with our teens, it's important to look at the fruit he exhibits when attempting to understand him. Simply calling oneself "Christian" doesn't mean that one is, in fact, a Christ follower, nor does it necessarily mean that one is glorifying Christ through his/her art. But it's also important to keep in mind that only God knows a person's heart and whether one is saved. So we can debate and discuss Kendrick's career and even whether it appears that he is honoring God in order to make better decisions about what we allow into our hearts and minds, but we can't and shouldn't do it in order to judge the artist himself.

So let's look at some of the facts. Although [Kendrick claims](#) that the Christian faith is the religious inspiration behind his music, he never mentions being a member of a local church. This doesn't mean that Kendrick isn't a member, but attending church is not central to his dialogue with society. This may be because most of his audience doesn't attend church. Neither did his conversion moment happen at a church; it occurred on the street after a tragic incident that has stuck with Kendrick ever since.

He has talked about his faith in God in several interviews, including [one in which he discusses](#) his encounter at a gas station in Johannesburg with a homeless man who encouraged him (also listen to his song on *To Pimp A Butterfly*, "[How Much A Dollar Cost](#)"). Kendrick tells the interviewer that he recognized that such situations go deeper than just giving someone money and wondered if God was testing his integrity. This doesn't sound like someone who is toying with his faith, but honestly wrestling. Yes, his Christian development does not follow a traditional path, namely Christian faith that's groomed inside of the four walls of the institutional church. Kendrick's faith seems to be shaped primarily by his engagement with a harsh world.

Whether profanity disqualifies him as a Christian, we must ask what it means to be a Christian. [Ephesians 4:29](#) says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." One of the goals of Christianity is building, uplifting, and edifying community. Profanity is deemed taboo because it's considered violent language and often not used to build people up. But what about when it's used in poetry or music lyrics? Can it be used emphatically to express anger and frustration with racism (as in "[Blacker the Berry](#)")? Or even content exposing the struggles among teens having sexual relationships, but categorizing it as temptation, as in "[Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter's Daughter](#)"? Are his lyrics meant to tear down or to uplift? To close people's eyes or to open them? It's also worth noting that if we are more offended by his profanity and less offended by the systemic violence and injustice many young black men face (which leads to profane outrage), we should seriously revisit our conception of Christianity.

One Christian gentleman we spoke to told us about his first time listening to *To Pimp A Butterfly*. He told us that after experiencing the song "u," tears flooded his eyes because Kendrick spoke to his own struggles with depression and survivor's guilt. He explained, "It reached deep into my soul, revealing the despair but refusing to leave me there by pointing to the hope. Good Gospel preaching has always done the same for me."

What may make us uncomfortable with Kendrick's music is his ability to hold in tension his Christian faith, sex, drugs, violence, numbing pleasure, and depression all in one song. In a *Christianity Today* article, [Dr. Daniel White Hodges calls](#) this a combining of the "sacred, profane, and secular in a tightly woven social knot which creates a type of nitty-gritty hermeneutic in which his audience members are able to relate and engage." In fact, this form of expression has always been central to hip-hop music, especially during the early '90s. Artists

like NAS, DMX, Tupac, and Notorious B.I.G. produced albums that explored these very issues.

A warning of course is that many young listeners will find license to sin if they carte blanche accept Lamar's lyrics as an endorsement to live a debauched lifestyle. There's a difference between listening with discernment and wholeheartedly accepting what an artist says simply because they're an outspoken believer. In the same way we should question the motivation of a "Christian" politician who is an outspoken racist, we should also take every thought or word captive in order to properly discern the impact of his music.

— Why do my kids (or their friends) love his music so much? Is it just the beat they like?

Again, how we answer that question depends on our kids themselves and on the environment in which we're raising them. If we're in places like Compton, they may love his music because it speaks to their reality and deepest longing to escape the chaos of the hood. If we're in less-challenging areas, it's possible that his music serves as a window into a world that is unfamiliar to them. Potentially, it could also be that they view Kendrick's so called "gangsta persona" as cool. Or perhaps, as [Bakari Kitwana suspects](#), artists like Kendrick speak to the feelings of abandonment, hopelessness, and fear prevalent among millennials and Gen Zers.

But the only way to know for sure is to ask your kids and their friends. What is appealing to them? How do they engage his music? What aspirations does it inspire in them? What have they learned from Kendrick concerning the challenges of growing up in the streets? Of course, the sound of his music could very well be the main draw, but why is it more appealing than other modern artists' sounds? What do they like about it?

— So should I let my kids listen to his music?

If your kids are old enough to think deeply about and critique music, then we think you can... *together*. If we allow our kids to listen to any music (both "secular" and Christian), many unhealthy and unbiblical ideas will influence them. But if we choose to engage music together, discussing, analyzing and critiquing it, we will teach them to be aware of how everything influences them and to be more intentional with what they put into their minds. Kendrick's music is no exception. Take some time as a family to research him, hip hop, and his influences (check out "Additional Resources" for a place to start). Then discuss the positives and negatives of his music, allowing your teens to calmly disagree and argue their positions (remember, the profanity is only *one* element of his music!).

We believe that Kendrick himself would condone this. [In an interview](#), he said, "I think every artist should always be responsible for how they go about marketing...or putting their music out or how they put they're words together." He continued on by mentioning how other artists who are less thoughtful may influence his young listeners in a negative way and how he strategically and thoughtfully attempts to do otherwise. But we must have ears to hear his message.

— Are there better Christian alternatives I could suggest?

While we understand the intent behind this question (give kids something that's more in line with [Phil. 4:8](#)), it often gets skewed and becomes legalistic: "If it plays on the Christian station

or is on a Christian label, then it's safe!" But sadly, that's often not true, not to mention that it teaches us to turn off our minds and simply accept whatever someone else deems to be quality. Not exactly what we want to teach our kids!

Instead, let's ask some good questions: What do we mean by "Christian"? Do we mean music that is divinely inspired or spiritually empowered? Are we suggesting that Kendrick's music is outside the realm of divine inspiration? Does God speak only through church folk? There are examples scattered throughout Scripture where unrighteous and unholy people, or individuals outside of the community of God, delivered prophetic messages. The prophet Balaam, who was originally hired by Balak to put a curse on Israel, was ordered by God to bless Israel ([Numbers 22-24](#)).

In the article "[Why Childish Gambino's 'This Is America' Is a Prophetic Message We Can't Ignore](#)," the managing editor of *Relevant Magazine* talks about how the prophetic voice does not require the messenger to be perfect, holy, or even worthy of praise: "As far as the Christian Scriptures are concerned, any [donkey] can prophesy (Num. 22:21-39)." Therefore God can speak through imperfect and flawed human vessels. Neither does the church have a monopoly on truth. Therefore, could God be speaking to the millennial generation through Kendrick's voice?

Other questions to consider (and possibly use as conversation starters with your kids as you work together to develop a theology of music):

- Are there Christian alternatives that speak about growing up in urban communities that *don't* use profanity and other explicit lyrics?
- Are explicitly "Christian" songs the only music we can and should listen to? Why/why not?
- If the definition of Christian is "Christ follower," should we be applying that label to inanimate objects, like clothing, songs, and posters? Why/why not?
- Could Kendrick have described the trials and tribulation of being raised in the hood within tidy lyrics?
- If the profanity were completely eliminated, would that make his music "clean" or "safe"?
- What makes music good? What makes it bad? Is all good music wholesome and neat?
- Based on these criteria, would the Bible be deemed "safe" to read? (God's Word illustrates incidents of adultery, rape, unnecessary violence, babies being sacrificed; in fact, it centers on a Man falsely accused, sentenced to death, and tortured all in one night—by the religious leaders! We shouldn't replace the Bible with a cleaner version, but instead engage it in all of its raw narrative as it depicts both human depravity and the hope of new life. In other words, the Bible shows us to appreciate the power of the resurrection by gazing at the "[challenge and pain](#)" of calvary.)

In case you hadn't already figured it out, we're not going to suggest alternatives. But we want to make it clear that we also don't believe that Kendrick's music is perfect, nor is it the type of music to never grapple with. It is challenging, and it can be the impetus for some great discussions between you and your kids.

— Discussion Questions

If your teens love Kendrick's music, the following are good questions to ask to start a deep, thoughtful, calm conversation that will help challenge them (and you!).

- How are the messages in his music impacting you?
- What does his music reveal within you?
- How do you feel about the profanity and explicit lyrics?

- If you were growing up in Compton, how would you respond to the situations Kendrick talks about in his albums and interviews?
- Turning the tables, what areas of your life might seem sinful if seen from an alternate perspective? Would a kid from Compton think going into debt \$100k+ for college is more profane than using profanity? How does our cultural conditioning shape what we think is sinful or virtuous?
- Do you think that Kendrick's lyrics disqualify him as a Christian?
- What does being a Christian mean to you?
- Do you have friends who live in places like Compton?
- (After listening to each album) Which track stood out to you and why?
- Do you think he's a voice for the current generation? Why/why not?
- Do you think it's possible for him to convey his ideas and reach the people he reaches *without* using profanity? Why/why not?
- What about his music is excellent?
- Do you think his music glorifies God and/or proclaims the Gospel? Why/why not?

Conclusion

Kendrick Lamar's music defies categorization and labeling, making it hard for us to box it in or nail it down. And that may be precisely why Millennials and Gen Zers love it. As we disciple them and encourage them to be more like Christ in everything, we need to not only acknowledge and celebrate the good, but also lovingly root out the bad. Kendrick is human and therefore imperfect, but there's much to be said for his willingness to be vulnerable, to grapple with extremely intense topics, and to try to find a way to Christ through it all. Because of his immense influence, it's important that we talk about these positives before tackling the profanity, abusive language, objectification of women, and violence. Even more importantly, we need to help our children confront how they use his music and allow it to influence them, both for good and for bad.

Related Axis Resources

- [A Parent's Guide to Swearing](#) (coming soon!)
- [A Parent's Guide to Drake](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Gen Z's Love of Music](#)

Additional Resources

- [Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration](#) by Daniel White Hodges
- [The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs, and a Cultural Theology](#) by Daniel White Hodges
- [The Hip-Hop Generation](#) by Bakari Kitwana
- [Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes and the New Reality of Race in America](#) by Bakari Kitwana
- "[Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer and the Making of a New Tradition](#)," Christ and Pop Culture
- "[On DAMN., Kendrick Wrestles without Resolution](#)," Christ and Pop Culture
- "[Album Review: Kendrick Lamar's DAMN. Is Brilliant, Anxious, and Spiritual](#)," *Vulture*
- "[The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar](#)," *Vanity Fair*

- “[Kendrick Lamar’s Real God](#),” Christ and Pop Culture
- “[Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Good Kid, mAAAd City’: A Lesson In Storytelling](#),” uDiscovermusic
- “[Kendrick Lamar on His New Album and the Weight of Clarity](#),” *The New York Times*
- “[What Do Kendrick And Kanye Owe Women Listeners?](#)” BuzzFeed News
- “[Hip-Hop Hymnals](#),” The New Republic
- “[Kendrick Lamar’s Duel with Damnation](#),” *Christianity Today*
- “[Why White Kids Love Hip Hop](#),” NPR
- “[Why Childish Gambino’s ‘This Is America’ Is a Prophetic Message We Can’t Ignore](#),” *Relevant Magazine*
- [Hip-Hop Evolution](#), Netflix [TV-MA]
- [The Get Down](#), Netflix [TV-MA]

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