

It's 1992: Tipper Gore knows where our kids are. Do we?

By **KENNETH KLOTHEN**

As a children's rights advocate, a parent and a long-time opponent of censorship, I'm fed up with the knee-jerk reaction of many of my friends to the work of Tipper Gore and her Parents Music Resource Center.

These otherwise sensible people decry Mrs. Gore as the Carry Nation of the airwaves, wielding the ax of censorship against freedom of artistic expression. They see her

Otherwise sensible people decry Mrs. Gore as the Carry Nation of the airwaves, but she's been a champion for children.

work as just another example of fundamentalist, authoritarian and intolerant politics emanating from the old Bible Belt. This completely misses Gore's point, and does a disservice to her attempt to refocus the country on children's and family rights, priorities abandoned during the last 12 years.

Some 40 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance. Thirty years ago, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child recognized that "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care."

And the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, the most recent global agreement, states that "the family, as the ... natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded ... protection and assistance."

Most Western countries have given more than lip service to these ideas and have actively developed ways in which government could protect the ability of families to

provide for the "growth and well-being" of members. State-subsidized day care for working mothers is common in Europe, as is *paid* leave for family emergencies.

In the U.S., however, we've been told for the past twelve years that any regulation of the marketplace is a threat to family values, that the choices and freedoms given us by the unrestrained market are the best guarantors of family well-being.

The results are well known to most parents. With a weak economy, high unemployment and decreased job security, it's now a necessity for many families that both parents work outside the home. With job benefits cut as companies trim labor costs, it's increasingly rare for employers to permit leave for family emergencies. And with the lack of affordable day-care and after-care, more and more kids are spending time on their own, without adult supervision.

Their parents, increasingly occupied with providing the basics for their kids, have less and less time to take an active role in their kids' lives. A father who isn't home when his child turns on the TV doesn't know whether the child is watching *Sesame Street* on PBS or Madonna on MTV; a mother at work when her children and their friends get together doesn't know whether they're listening to Raffi or Prince.

Meanwhile, the same marketplace that's ever more stingy with wages and benefits has discovered the profit potential of marketing to children. TV shows for young people are awash in commercials for everything from sugar-coated breakfast cereals to vacations at Disney World. Thousands of products

aimed at kids are introduced every year.

And the music industry produces and promotes a dizzying array of new styles appealing to the young: heavy metal to hip-hop, rap to rock. Music videos on television further promote sales of pop recordings.

Even the most jaded parent would be unhappy with the content of some of the materials regularly promoted to children. Sexually-explicit lyrics are just the beginning. Other lyrics include calls to sadism, racism and



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homophobia, while many videos graphically depict women as little more than male trophies. Most parents would want to know whether their children are being exposed to these views of the world, not necessarily to censor them but at least to offer alternative visions.

Recognizing that families need cooperation from government and business, Gore argued for a rating system that would inform consumers if a recording contained sexually-

explicit material — something that the movie industry does voluntarily. She didn't propose to ban the sale of any material — not even to minors — and in fact opposed legislation that would have done so. When she thought she had inadvertently lent support to those who were advocating censorship, she took pains to distinguish her views.

Tipper Gore's position is clear, and it's one that children's advocates would support: In today's world, families need cooperation from other forces in our society that affect kids. If someone's going to make money selling products to children, they ought to shoulder responsibility for the welfare of their customers.

That's a message totally consistent with the view of children's rights expressed by the major human-rights declarations. It's also an important message for America today, one that signals a much-needed change from the me-first, money-first ethos of the last twelve years.

Gore's work holds another message. At the time she spoke out, she was married to a U.S. senator with ambitions for national office. Instead of assuming the seen-but-not-heard posture of the traditional political wife, she took a position both she and her husband knew would be unpopular. She did it not for political advantage but because she thought it necessary for families' well-being.

Whether or not you agree with Tipper Gore on the responsibilities that the recording industry has vis-à-vis our children, her willingness to speak out for what she saw as their best interests is to be admired. And whether or not one intends to vote for the ticket that includes her husband, Gore's thinking in defense of children is welcome during this year when "family values" could otherwise be just another empty slogan.

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