



Marijuana legalization: What parents can say to their children

With the decriminalization of small amounts of marijuana and marijuana-infused foods and beverages this week, and the development of a commercial marijuana market over the next year, parents are asking what they should say to their children.

Since parents are the primary influence on adolescent behavior, even if it may not seem that way, it is important to discuss the new law and what is expected in your family. High school students who smoke marijuana report that they started between the ages of 13 -14 so conversations need to start early.

First, ask children what they know about marijuana. This is a good time to correct the many myths about marijuana. For example, many teenagers tell us that marijuana cures cancer. This is not true.

Then move on to the facts.

- Most Seattle high school students do not use marijuana. Seventy percent of Seattle high school seniors report that they do not use marijuana, according to the Washington State Healthy Youth Survey. What this means is that everyone is not doing it.
- Among high school students, the perception of risk associated with marijuana use has decreased and use rates have increased over the past several years. In fact, marijuana *is* risky for adolescents to use. In our Adolescent Substance Abuse Program, I regularly see teenagers who use marijuana several times per week and find that they cannot cut down their use despite the problems it causes at home and at school. These are teenagers who are giving up things that have been important to them and spending a great deal of time obtaining marijuana and recovering from its effects. Adolescents enter substance abuse treatment for marijuana problems more than any other drug problem, including alcohol.
- The still-developing adolescent brain is harmed by regular marijuana use. Regular marijuana use among teens is associated with school failure. Avoiding marijuana is a good idea if students want to do well in school.

More science-based facts about marijuana use are available at:

<http://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/marijuana>.

Engage in a family discussion about all drugs, including marijuana.

- Set family rules about drug and alcohol use.
- Agree on appropriate consequences if youth use drugs and write them down. Examples include losing driving or cell phone privileges. The most difficult part



may be enforcing those consequences so make sure that you are willing and able to carry them out if needed.

- It's essential for parents to keep lines of communication open with their children throughout the teen years. Know where they are going to be and with whom.

More tips for parents are available at: <http://theparenttoolkit.org>.

Finally, remember that you are the most important role model for your children. If you use marijuana, or plan to start once marijuana shops open, think about how your use affects your children. You may not realize it, but your children watch you closely. Have a discussion among your adult friends and family about the acceptability of using marijuana during gatherings at your homes. If adults eat marijuana brownies at parties where children are present, make sure they are only accessible to adults. Just like parents are encouraged to lock up alcohol and medications, parents should lock up their pot. Needless to say, parents should never drive while under the influence of marijuana or any other substance.

Parents and teens are not alone when it comes to preventing youth marijuana use. New laws that are meant to keep marijuana out of the hands of youth should be enforced. Schools have zero-tolerance policies. Healthcare providers talk to teenage patients about avoiding drugs. Everyone has a role to play in keeping our children drug-free. Additional local information is available at the ADAI Clearinghouse: <http://adaiclearinghouse.org>.

If you think that your teenager may be using marijuana or other drugs, information about local resources is available at the Washington Recovery Help Line, a 24-hour service, at 866.789.1511 or <http://www.warecoveryhelpline.org>.

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