



CANNABIS TALK KIT

KNOW HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR TEEN

#cannabis



INTRODUCTION

“When I was a kid...” doesn’t really work when talking with your kids about cannabis today. It’s a whole new ballgame.

Cannabis—legal or otherwise—is a hot topic. Parents who provide their kids with balanced information about the effects associated with cannabis (often called marijuana) can help them make informed decisions. It’s more important than ever for parents to protect their kids’ health and development by addressing this issue early and often.

That’s why we created this talk kit. We want to help families navigate through a changing cannabis landscape—one that includes new policies like legalization and regulation, as well as new products, like “shatter” and “edible” candies and cookies.

Here, you’ll learn how to set the stage to have an open dialogue with your teen—about any issue, but cannabis in particular. Your teens are likely asking you some tough questions and challenging you on the topic of cannabis. We’ve worked with top experts in health and parenting to help you talk with your teen.

Believe it or not, you are one of the most powerful influences in your child’s life. More than friends. More than TV. More than celebrities.

We know you have questions, and we’re here to help.

WHAT’S INSIDE

THE FACTS: What do I need to know now about cannabis?	3
THE RISKS: Why is cannabis risky for teens?	8
• The new cannabis landscape	
• Cannabis and the law	
• Cannabis and the teen brain	
• Cannabis and driving	
• Cannabis and alcohol	
START HERE: How do I talk with my teen about cannabis?	12
• Get in the right frame of mind	
• Try active listening	
• Words to avoid when talking about cannabis (or any issue with your teen)	
WHAT TO SAY: OK, now just tell me what to say	16
• Responding to your teen’s questions and arguments	
• A note to parents if you smoke or drink	
RESOURCES: Help from DrugFreeKidsCanada.org	24

THE FACTS / *What do I need to know now about cannabis?*

What is cannabis?

Cannabis, also known as marijuana, is a product of the plant *Cannabis sativa*.

After alcohol, cannabis is the most commonly used psychoactive substance (a drug that affects your mind) in Canada.¹

The main active chemical in marijuana, also present in other forms of cannabis, is THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol). Of the roughly 400 chemicals found in the cannabis plant, THC affects the brain the most. It is a mind-altering chemical that gives those who use cannabis a high. Another active chemical in cannabis is CBD (cannabidiol), which is presently being studied and used for medical purposes.

What does it look like?

Cannabis consists of the dried flowers, fruiting tops and leaves from the marijuana plant. It is most commonly a greenish or brownish colour. Cannabis resin (or hashish) is a brown or black secretion from the marijuana plant that can be further processed to produce hash oil, wax or “shatter,” a relatively recent by-product of cannabis. Shatter is a concentrated extract with very high levels of THC.²

What are some terms for cannabis?

Marijuana, bud, blunt, chronic, dab, dope, ganja, grass, green, hash, herb, joint, loud, mary jane, mj, pot, reefer, skunk, smoke, trees, wax, weed.

Why some teens use



Teens use cannabis for different reasons, which may include:

- to relax
- to have fun
- to alter their perspective
- to fit in
- to experiment
- to try something new

Some teens see it as natural and easy to get—maybe even easier than alcohol.

¹ 2015 Canadian Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey (CTADS)

² Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), 2016

How is it used?

Cannabis is commonly rolled into a cigarette (called a “joint”) or in a cigar (called a “blunt”) or it’s smoked in a pipe or water pipe (called a “bong”). A single intake of smoke is called a “hit.”

Cannabis resin can be vaporized and/or smoked in a pipe or bong (where the smoke is drawn through water before inhaling it).

In addition, there are cannabis concentrates such as hash, wax, shatter, tinctures and oil, most of which are ingested by heating and then inhaling the smoke.

Cannabis can also be brewed as tea or mixed into food and ingested as edible candies, cookies and brownies.³

Cannabis can also be laced with other substances (e.g. cocaine). Available evidence suggests that cannabis can also be contaminated with pesticides and harmful chemicals.⁴

Learn more about cannabis at drugfreekidscanada.org.

Who is using it?

The rate of cannabis use is two times higher among Canadian youth aged 15–24 as it is for adults.⁵ One in five teens aged between 15 and 19 have used cannabis in the past year.⁶ In Ontario, cannabis use increases with high school grade level to a high of 37.2% among 12th grade students.⁷ Cannabis use is more prevalent among males than females, although the rate of use among females is on the rise.⁸

What should I look for in my home?



In addition to drugs themselves, keep your eye out for rolling papers, cigars and pipes of any kind, as well as small plastic bags, containers and lighters.

For more on what to watch out for, go to

drugfreekidscanada.org

³ CCSA, 2016

⁴ Journal of Toxicology, 2013 Nicholas Sullivan et al.

⁵ CTADS, 2015

⁶ Statistics Canada, 2016

⁷ Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS), 2015 (reported High School use of marijuana: Gr.9—10.3%, Gr.10—25.2%, Gr.11—35.1%, Gr.12—37.2%)

⁸ Statistics Canada, 2016

What are the short-term effects of cannabis use?

Short-term effects of cannabis include feeling happy, relaxation, increased sociability and heightened sensation, problems with memory and learning, distorted perception (sights, sounds, time, touch), trouble with thinking and problem solving, body tremors, loss of motor coordination, increased heart rate and anxiety. These effects may be even greater when other drugs are mixed with cannabis.⁹

What are the potential long-term effects of cannabis use?

There is no single reason that teens might use cannabis. They may try cannabis for social reasons, as a way to fit in or socialize with their peers, or because they think “everyone is doing it.” They may also use cannabis as a coping mechanism to deal with life stresses.¹⁰

If a teen is using cannabis as a coping method for anxiety, depression or stress, he is more likely to continue this behaviour, if it works for him, and for some, it works immediately. He gains instant relief and gratification. He may think, “When I feel stressed out, I smoke pot and it relaxes me.” Instead of taking time to process and deal with the feeling, he alters it by getting high, which in turn stunts the emotional coping process. The teen’s stress tolerance is lowered, because he has not experienced the natural passing of the feeling, and he hasn’t found and used a healthy behaviour—like sports, hanging out with a friend, playing music, talking to someone about how he feels or reading a book—to aid in coping with the pressure and stress he feels.

What is regular use?



Regular use of cannabis means that the use of cannabis occurs regularly over time. It may involve using cannabis every day, almost every day, or every weekend over a period of several months or over a number of years.

⁹ CCSA, 2015; Beirness and Porath-Waller, 2015

¹⁰ McKiernan & Fleming (2017) Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis, CCSA

With the notable exception of drug-impaired driving, using cannabis is unlikely to result in permanent disability or death, but too much of the drug in a person's system can have harmful effects, and isn't as benign as some teens believe. Early and frequent cannabis use can increase risk of chronic cough, bronchitis and psychosis in vulnerable individuals.

Cannabis is an addictive substance. The risk of developing addiction is one in six among those who start using cannabis during adolescence.¹¹

Regular cannabis use among adolescents is associated with an increased risk of experiencing psychotic symptoms (changes in thoughts, feelings and behaviours), especially when there is a family or personal history of psychotic disorders. Some studies have suggested that cannabis may also increase risk of anxiety and depression.¹²

Early and frequent cannabis use is linked with poor performance in school, lower grades and increased risk of dropping out. The evidence is still unclear as to whether regular use affects an adolescent's IQ.¹³ However, research suggests that early, regular, heavy and long-term use of cannabis by teens may impair their cognitive abilities and may not be fully reversible.¹⁴

Youth might be particularly vulnerable to these negative outcomes due to the extensive changes that are taking place in the brain during adolescence, especially the ongoing development and maturation of the prefrontal cortex, which is critical to higher-order cognitive processes such as impulse control, working memory, planning, problem solving and emotional regulation.¹⁵

Cannabis, just like any other drug, can lead to addiction.

It affects the brain's reward system in the same way as all other drugs of addiction—and the likelihood of developing problem use or addiction increases considerably for those who start young.¹⁶

¹¹⁻¹²⁻¹³⁻¹⁵ George & Vaccarino, 2015

¹⁴ Meier et al, 2012

¹⁶ Drug Alcohol Depend, Winters & Lee, 2008

How do I know if my teen is using?

Teens will be teens. They sleep late, their groups of friends change, they can be moody and they may have on-again, off-again trouble in school. So how do you know when your teen is using cannabis or other drugs?

Signs to watch for



Declining school work and grades



Deteriorating relationships with family



Abrupt changes in friends



Less openness and honesty



Abnormal health issues or sleeping habits

What it comes down to is that you know your teen best.

If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

Talk to them—early and openly about cannabis.

“Marijuana is not a benign drug!”

“Pine River Institute works with adolescents with addictive behaviours. For many of the youth we work with, cannabis is their drug of choice. Most of these teens believed that marijuana was a benign substance, “just not a big deal” until they were too far down the road. Many of their parents didn't fully understand that this drug represented any real danger for their child until it was too late. We know from our experience that early and frequent use of cannabis has a number of negative consequences for youth, specifically around their emotional maturity.”

—Victoria L. Creighton, Psy.D., C.Psych., Clinical Director, Pine River Institute

THE RISKS / *Why is cannabis risky for teens?*

The cannabis landscape

Cannabis is often one of the first drugs a teen is offered. Canadian youth have one of the highest rates of cannabis use worldwide.

In 2016, the World Health Organization compared past-30-day cannabis use among youth aged 15 across 40 countries and found that use by Canadian youth (13%) was the second highest.¹⁷

The cannabis landscape in Canada doesn't change the fact that all mind-altering substances—including cannabis—are harmful for the still-developing teen brain. That's why it's important that your child inherently understand that you don't approve of his use of cannabis, in the same way that you don't want her to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol or use other drugs.

Cannabis and the law

Cannabis is presently illegal in Canada.

On April 13, 2017, the Government of Canada introduced legislation to legalize, strictly regulate and restrict access to cannabis. The proposed Cannabis Act would create a strict legal framework for controlling the production, distribution, sale and possession of cannabis in Canada.

Under the current legislation in Canada, cannabis is a Schedule II controlled substance under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, meaning that growing, possessing, distributing and selling cannabis for recreational use are illegal.

All possession of cannabis for non-medical purposes is illegal everywhere in Canada. If you are found possessing cannabis by police, you may be subject to arrest, and possible criminal prosecution.

There is an exception for those possessing cannabis for medical purposes as supported by a medical practitioner.¹⁸

¹⁷ Health Behaviour in School-aged Children 2016, World Health Organization

¹⁸ CCSA, 2016

Cannabis and the teen brain

The parts of the adolescent brain that develop first are those that control physical coordination, emotion and motivation. The pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain that controls reasoning and impulses, does not fully mature until around the age of 25.¹⁹

It's as if, while the other parts of the teen brain are shouting, the prefrontal cortex is not quite ready to play referee. This can have noticeable effects on teen behaviour, such as:

- difficulty holding back or controlling emotions
- a preference for high-excitement and low-effort activities
- poor planning and judgement (rarely thinking of negative consequences)
- more risky, impulsive behaviours, including experimenting with drugs and alcohol

During the adolescent years, your teen is especially susceptible to the negative effects of any and all drug use, including cannabis. Scientific evidence shows that the use of cannabis during the teen years can interfere with school performance and well-being.

Teens are more likely to engage in risky behaviours than any other age group.²⁰ Risk-taking by teens can include drug use, binge drinking, dangerous driving (e.g. texting, driving while high or being a passenger with a high driver) and engaging in unsafe sex.²¹

¹⁹ George & Vaccarino, 2015

²⁰ Steinberg, 2008

²¹ Kann et al, 2014

Cannabis and driving

It is illegal to drive while impaired by cannabis. Drug-impaired driving has the same penalties as alcohol-impaired driving. Yet many young people still get behind the wheel after smoking pot. In 2011, 12.6% of young Canadians aged 15–24 admitted to driving after using cannabis while 10.7% reported driving after drinking.²²

A 2016 survey revealed that 19% of 16 to 19 year olds who had been a passenger in a car driven by someone who had consumed cannabis vs 17% who had been a passenger in a car driven by someone who had consumed alcohol.²³

Data from a recent roadside survey in Ontario revealed that cannabis was the most common illegal drug present among young drivers.²⁴

Cannabis use affects decision-making and judgement as well as the process of acquiring knowledge and understanding, and the process of when the brain tells certain muscles and limbs to move, otherwise known as cognitive and motor functions; this is a safety hazard for drivers.

Being a passenger in a car with a driver who has used drugs or alcohol can lead to consequences just as tragic as driving when impaired.

²² Health Canada, 2012

²³ DFK tracking survey, 2016

²⁴ Beirness, Beasley & McClafferty, 2015

Cannabis and alcohol

While some teens may argue that cannabis is safer than alcohol, research shows that teens don't typically use alcohol OR cannabis; they use both, often at the same time²⁵—a dangerous combination.

The use of cannabis alone is enough to impair judgement. The biggest impact of mixing cannabis and alcohol is the significant increase in impairment of judgement. The level of intoxication and side effects experienced can be unpredictable. When cannabis and alcohol are used at the same time, there is a greater likelihood of negative side effects occurring either physically or psychologically (panic, anxiety and paranoia).²⁶

The use of both alcohol and cannabis before driving can greatly increase the risk of getting into a car accident.

This is similarly the case when mixing cannabis and other drugs.²⁷

A doctor's point of view

“As a psychiatrist who specializes in people with addictions and mental illness, we see an increasing number of young people between the ages of 17 to 25 coming to our psychiatric facility with new onset psychosis and mood disorders in the context of heavy and persistent marijuana use. Unfortunately, we see much harm of marijuana use in youth and those with pre-existing mental illness. The best strategy is to prevent the development of problem marijuana use in the first place—the risks are high and parents should know about available treatment options should kids need it.”

—Dr. Tony George, Chief of Addictions, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)

²⁵ Partnership Attitude Tracking Study, 2013

²⁶ National Cannabis information and support, Australia, 2016

²⁷ CCSA, 2016

START HERE / *How do I talk with my teen about cannabis?*

Talking with teenagers is difficult to begin with. Talking with them about drugs and alcohol is even harder. As a parent, you are often met with resistance. The good news is there are ways to engage your teen that promote open and positive communication.

* **Please note: We are sensitive to the value of gender neutrality; however, we thought it important to use language that refers to both sons and daughters in providing examples of how to talk with your teen.**

Get in the right frame of mind

Here are some effective tools to set the stage for a conversation with your son or daughter about substances use:

- **Keep an open mind.** If you want to have a productive conversation with your teen, one thing to keep in mind is that when a child feels judged or condemned, she is less likely to be receptive to your message. We suggest that, in order to achieve the best outcome for you and your teen, try to preserve a position of objectivity and openness. We understand that this is challenging and may take practice.
- **Put yourself in your teen's shoes.** For instance, consider the manner in which you yourself would prefer to be addressed when speaking about a difficult subject. It might be helpful to think about how you felt when you were a teenager.
- **Be clear about your goals.** It may help to write them down. Once you know what you would like to get from the conversation, you can look back at these afterward and review what went right, what went wrong, what goals were met, which ones were saved for a later date and whether you were able to deliver them effectively.

Sample goals



Begin an ongoing conversation about my teen's use



Gain insight into the pressures he or she may be facing with drugs



Express concern and support



Gauge how she feels about cannabis in general

- **Be calm and relaxed.** If you approach your teen with anger or panic, it will make it harder to achieve your goals. If you are anxious about having a conversation with him, find some things to do that will help relax you (take a walk, call a friend, meditate).
- **Be positive.** If you approach the situation with shame, anger, scare tactics or disappointment, your efforts will be counter-productive. Instead, be attentive, curious, respectful and understanding.
- **Don't lecture.** Keep in mind that if you spoke with her about drugs when she was younger, she already knows that you disapprove of her use. To lecture her about this will most likely lead to her shutting down, tuning you out, getting angry or worse—it could be misinterpreted as your disapproving of her instead of her actions, which can lead to shame and, in turn, more substance use. Throwing your weight around in order to stop something from happening (“You can’t, because I’m your parent and I said so”) is highly ineffective. Avoid pulling rank if you get frustrated.
- **Find a comfortable setting.** Announcing a sit-down meeting (“We need to have a talk after dinner”) will usually be met with resistance, while a more spontaneous, casual approach will lower her anxiety and maybe even your own. Perhaps this means taking a walk with her or and sitting in the yard or park. Look for a place that feels less confined but not too distracting.
- **Be aware of body language.** If your teen is sitting, you want to be sitting as well. If she is standing, ask her to sit down with you. Be mindful of finger-pointing and crossed arms; these are closed gestures, while uncrossed legs and a relaxed posture are open gestures.

You matter!

“As a community educator, I present regularly to parents, youth, teachers and administrators about the risks associated with marijuana use during adolescence. Teens are often telling me that marijuana is helping them cope with disorders such as anxiety, depression and ADHD. What is alarming is that not only are teens unclear about the effects and harms of marijuana, but parents too are confused and uninformed regarding the risk of potential developmental harms with regular marijuana use. We need to continue to have these important conversations with our youth. A message that I share with parents is their kids are listening to them. Parents play a key role in moderating the influences of alcohol and drug use by their children.”

—Dr. Jackie Smith, RN, PhD, Addiction and Family Wellness Counselor, Calgary

Try active listening

Active listening is a skill that takes practice and is highly effective.²⁸ Here are some examples of how you can exercise active listening with your teen.



Try asking open-ended questions.

These are questions that elicit more than just a “yes” or “no” response from your teen.

Try: “Tell me more about...”



Be positive.

Find the positives in a situation, no matter how hard it may seem.

Try: “Thank you for your honesty. I really appreciate it.”



Let your teen know you hear her.

Reflect back what you are hearing from your teen—either verbatim, or just the sentiment.

Try: “I’m hearing that you feel overwhelmed, and that smoking pot relaxes you. Is that right?”



Sum up and ask questions.

Show her you’re listening the entire time and ask for her input.

Try: “Did I get everything? Do you have anything more to add?”



Ask permission.

Ask your teen if it’s OK to speak with her about her concerns, and whether it’s OK that you offer some feedback.

Try: “Are you OK with my asking you this? Do you mind if I give you some advice?”



Offer empathy and compassion.

Insert understanding and show your teen you get it.

Try: “I hear that smoking pot helps your anxiety. I’m sorry you’re feeling anxious; I know that’s a really difficult feeling. Can we think of some other activities that can help you relax?”

²⁸ Third Edition, “Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change,” William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick

Words to avoid when talking about cannabis (or any issue with your teen)

AVOID	INSTEAD, USE
<p>BUT You did well on your report card but I know you can work even harder.</p>	<p>AND You did well on your report card and I know you can work even harder.</p>
<p>SHOULD You should stop smoking pot.</p>	<p>WANT I want you to stop smoking pot, and I'm here to help you.</p>
<p>BAD Smoking pot is bad for you.</p>	<p>HARMFUL Smoking pot is harmful for your health and brain.</p>
<p>STUPID Smoking pot is a stupid choice.</p>	<p>UNHEALTHY Smoking pot is unhealthy for you, and that's why I'm concerned.</p>
<p>DISAPPROVE I disapprove of your hanging out with that group of friends.</p>	<p>CONCERNED I am concerned about your group of friends and worry that they may not be the best influence.</p>
<p>DISAPPOINTED I am disappointed in you for breaking curfew.</p>	<p>WORRIED I am worried about your decision to come home past curfew.</p>
<p>CAN'T You can't come home at 11 p.m. on weeknights.</p>	<p>DON'T WANT I don't want you to come home this late at night anymore.</p>

Be patient

Remember to be clear about your goals, be positive and offer compassion. These skills take practice, so if the talk doesn't go the way you hoped it might, remember that you will have other opportunities to try them. Have more than one conversation, which will give you many opportunities to get it right and improve upon what didn't go so well the last time.

WHAT TO SAY / *OK, now just tell me what to say.*

Responding to your teen's questions and arguments

Ultimately, there is no “script” for talking with your teen about cannabis. But let’s look at some of the arguments your teen might make when you bring up cannabis, and what you can say in response.

YOUR TEEN SAYS: “I know, I know. You’ve talked with me about this before.”

YOU CAN SAY

HERE'S WHY

“I know we’ve had conversations about drugs before, and I’m sorry if you feel like I’m being a nag.”



Taking responsibility and acknowledging a teen’s feelings is an effective way to reduce resistance.

“I want us to be able to discuss topics because I love you and I want to help during these years when you’re faced with a lot of difficult choices.”



This statement shows compassion for what he is going through.

“I’m sure you’ve heard about the government’s announcement to legalize and regulate cannabis. I think it’s important that we talk about it. Would that be OK?”



Asking permission is essential to open communication, and makes your teen feel empowered within the dialogue. Be prepared for a possible response of “NO, I don’t want to talk.” If this happens, ask why. Then have him suggest a time when he would be willing to talk.

YOUR TEEN SAYS: [nothing]

YOU CAN SAY

HERE'S WHY

“Do kids at your school talk about cannabis? What do they say?”

“Do you know anyone at school who smokes pot? What did she say about it?”

“Have you ever been offered cannabis?”



If you find it hard to get your teen to start talking, try asking questions about her friends or classmates. It may be easier for her to open up about someone other than herself. This can lead her to share her thoughts with you.

If she doesn’t want to talk, remind her that you’re there for her when she has things on her mind.

YOUR TEEN SAYS: “I’m only doing it once in a while on weekends, so it’s not a big deal.”

YOU CAN SAY

HERE’S WHY

“I’m happy to hear that this is not something you do on a regular basis. The fact is, using any drug can be harmful at your age because your brain is still developing.”



Even though a parent may want her teen to be completely abstinent, it is imperative to point out the positive that this is not something that has become a daily habit. This allows the teen to feel like she isn’t a bad person or a disappointment.

“I heard you say that you don’t think it’s a big deal.”



Repeating what you’ve heard is an example of reflective listening.

“What would make it feel like a big deal to you?”



This gets your teen to think about the future, what her boundaries are around drug use and what would make it “a big deal.” It will give you insight into what is important to her. If use progresses and some of these boundaries are crossed, you can then bring that up at a later date.

“What are some things that keep you from using pot more often than you already do?”



This is a question that makes your teen think about the reasons why she doesn’t want to use pot more often. It allows her to think about what pot use would interfere with if she did it more regularly.

YOUR TEEN SAYS: “Would you rather I drink alcohol? Weed is so much safer.”

YOU CAN SAY

HERE'S WHY

“What is going on in your life that makes you feel like you want to do either?”



This question can easily throw you off course. If it rattles you, posing a question back to him is a good buffer while you think about your answer.

Your response may still be met with “nothing” or another one-word answer, but even the word “nothing” can lead to another supportive statement from you, like “I’m glad to hear there isn’t anything going on in your life that makes you want to drink or smoke, and I also know it’s unrealistic to think that it isn’t going to be offered to you.”

“Honestly, I don’t want you to be doing anything that can harm you—whether that’s smoking pot or cigarettes, drinking or behaving recklessly. I’m interested in knowing why you think weed is safer than alcohol.”



Reminding your teen that you care deeply about his health and well-being, and expressing genuine curiosity about his thought process, is going to help him open up.

Engage youth in conversation

“At our early intervention clinic we recognize the significant potential effects of regular cannabis use on youth and young adult mental outcomes. Engaging youth in an open and non-biased framework of discussion is important in the treatment process. We also recognize the important role that parents can have in this process, thus giving parents the skill set to have these discussions with their kids is vital.”

—Dr. Philip Tibbo, Professor of Psychiatry, Dr. Paul Janssen Chair in Psychotic Disorders, Dalhousie University

YOUR TEEN SAYS: “Marijuana is a plant. It’s natural. How harmful could it be?”

YOU CAN SAY

HERE’S WHY

“Not all plants are necessarily healthy or good for you—think about cocaine or heroin or even poison ivy.”



This helps your teen rethink her point.

“I understand that, and I am not suggesting that you’re going to spin out of control, or that your life as you know it is going to be over. I would just like to redirect you to the idea that when a person is high, her judgement is not what it ordinarily is and that can be harmful.”



This statement points out that you are reasonable and are not using scare tactics. It also redirects your teen back to your goal of helping her understand the harmful side effects of cannabis.

“People I know who use alcohol or pot on a regular basis are using it to numb themselves or avoid feelings.”



This brings some personal perspective into the conversation, and lets your teen know that you see the effects of substance use in your own life.

“I would much rather you find healthy ways to cope with difficult feelings than turn to drugs. Can we brainstorm activities?”



Here, you’re showing concern, asking permission and promoting collaboration in thinking through healthy alternatives—like yoga, reading or sports.

YOUR TEEN SAYS: “But it’s going to be legal soon; why would they make something legal that could hurt me?”

YOU CAN SAY

HERE’S WHY

“If marijuana is legalized, it’s going to be legal at a certain age, like alcohol. But let’s explore your question in more detail, because it’s a good one. Why would the government make something legal that could be harmful?”



Letting your teen know that this is a valid question is important to his being receptive to your answer. Expressing curiosity with an open-ended question keeps the conversation going.

“Let’s look at alcohol; it’s legal, but causes damage, including DUIs, car accidents and other behaviour that leads to jail time. Alcohol can also cause major health problems, including liver problems.”



Alcohol is a great example of a regulated substance having severely harmful side effects.

“Cigarettes are also legal, even though they are highly addictive and proven to cause birth defects and cancer. Just because something is legal and regulated doesn’t make it safe or mean it isn’t harmful.”

YOUR TEEN SAYS: “Come on. I only did it once, and I’m totally fine.”

YOU CAN SAY

HERE’S WHY

“OK. Why did you do it only once? Why did you stop, or decide not to do it again?”



Asking your teen why he isn’t doing it more than once can lead to his explaining the reasons for not liking it. He might mention that he was only offered it once.

“Will you tell me about your experience? I’m genuinely curious to know what it was like for you. How did it make you feel?”



This is an example of an open-ended question that helps you uncover what he may or may not have liked about getting high.

YOUR TEEN SAYS: “I don’t know what to say when other kids ask me to use.”

YOU CAN SAY

HERE’S WHY

“Let’s think of some ways that you can turn down the offer that you would be comfortable saying.”



Instead of telling her what to say or do when she is put in an uncomfortable situation, why not ask her? Brainstorming with your teen on how she may get out of a sticky situation will be more effective than telling her. Help your teen think of ways to turn down offers for her own reasons, like “I’m not into that,” or “I have a big game tomorrow and don’t want to be groggy.”

YOUR TEEN SAYS: “But *you* smoked weed when you were younger.”

YOU CAN SAY

HERE'S WHY

*If you **did** smoke weed when you were younger*

“I’m not going to pretend like I didn’t, and that’s why I’m talking to you about this. I will tell you that when I did smoke, my judgement was compromised and the only thing that prevented me from getting into some horrible circumstances was luck.”



You may want to point out some of the negative things that happened to you (or your friends) that you wish hadn’t.

“And you may be thinking: Well, you did it, and nothing horrendous happened to you. I just want you to understand that these are chances you may take, and they are just that, chances. A lot of harmful things don’t happen to you because of your ability to make clear decisions. When you are stoned, that ability is very much compromised.”



Here, you’re not only being informative but reminding her that cannabis can impact her judgement.

*If you **didn’t** smoke weed when you were younger*

“You may or may not believe this, but I never smoked weed when I was a kid. It didn’t have a place in my life, and would have interfered with the activities I enjoyed.”



Here, you’re explaining why cannabis didn’t interest you. Your reasoning may have been that you didn’t want it to interfere with the activities you enjoyed; that you didn’t feel you needed to use weed to fit in; that you were turned off by the smell; or any other honest reason that kept you from trying cannabis yourself.

A note to parents if you smoke or drink

If you use cannabis or drink alcohol—whether in front of your teen or not—you should anticipate that he is going to call you out on this (“But you smoke weed/drink alcohol!”)

Take the time to reflect on, and perhaps reevaluate, your own use—especially if your teen is seeing you use. You may want to consider the effect your behaviour has on him.

For instance, if you come home from a long, stressful day and the first thing you do is smoke a joint or pour yourself a drink, you may want to try modeling another behaviour for your child (like going for a walk, working out, reading, stretching, deep breathing or doing something else that helps you unwind). Showing your teen that you use a substance to relieve stress or as a coping skill can send the wrong message.

Ask yourself why you drink and/or smoke, how often, what time of day and how much you use. These answers are going to affect your credibility with your teen, give you some insight into your own behavior and allow you to evaluate whether your substance use is in any way becoming a harmful and unhealthy coping mechanism.

These are questions only you can answer. Think about them in an honest manner, and reach out for help if you need it.

Our Get Help section at drugfreekidscanada.org lists the resources available to you for help in your region. If you don’t feel comfortable talking about your substance use with your teen, you can put the focus back on him. You can say, “I’m glad you brought this topic up. I think it’s important that we talk about my use as well as yours, and I would like it if we started with your use. Why do you feel the need to drink or smoke?”

Try asking your teen, “How does my use affect you? I’m curious, because who you are and how you are feeling is important to me.” This invites him to share and ask questions and promotes collaboration.

Consider also asking your teen, “How does knowing that I use pot or drink alcohol make you think differently about your own decisions?” Open-ended questions like these show curiosity, respect and understanding.

And lastly, be sure to express your love and caring about your child’s health, development and well-being.

Need help?



If you feel you need outside help, look for a professional who specializes in addiction. The drug issue will continue to change with the times, but the one thing that will remain constant is the need for information and support when raising a teen. You are the most important, and most powerful, influence in your teen’s life. Drug Free Kids Canada is here to help you all along the way. You can start at drugfreekidscanada.org.

RESOURCES / *Help from the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids*

Drug Free Kids Canada—Where families come for help

Drug Free Kids Canada wants to educate, inspire and support parents to prevent substance abuse by youth. Our website, drugfreekidscanada.org provides families with the information parents need to understand the ever-changing drug landscape, along with evidence-based resources to help you deal with teen substance abuse.

Become a part of our Family Support Network and join our community of parents, caregivers and families helping one another with resources, mentorship and support.

*We thank the Partnership for Drug Free Kids for permission to reproduce the **Cannabis Talk Kit** for Canadian parents.*

Donate to support



Resources like this talk kit are available free of charge because of generous donors. Please consider making a donation at drugfreekidscanada.org. Help us continue to help Canadian families. We appreciate your support.

Our sincere thanks to:



Health Canada Santé Canada

for its support and collaboration in the production and distribution of this brochure to ensure this resource is made available to all Canadians.



Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

for its help in ensuring the content of this brochure is the most current and evidence-informed information possible.

Special thanks to:

Marcia Lee Taylor

President and CEO
Partnership for Drug-Free Kids

Heather Senior, LCSW

Parent Support Network Manager
Partnership for Drug-Free Kids

Karen Soren MD

Director, Adolescent Medicine
Columbia University Center

The Marijuana Talk Kit (US Version) was made possible through a generous grant from the Achelis & Bodman Foundation.

Additional resources for parents:
drugfreekidscanada.org/drug-info/cannabis