

Cannabis Education Toolkit



FOR PARENTS AND
ADULT MENTORS

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Cannabis safety information and tips

LEARN ABOUT UNDERAGE USE AND HOW TO DISCUSS IT WITH TEENS

Reducing teen health risks means having access to trustworthy cannabis information. From parents to adult mentors—like teachers, youth workers, coaches, counselors, and faith leaders—this toolkit provides evidence-based facts and advice on how to have positive conversations with kids about the risks and consequences of use on teens' health.



Questions? Please contact:

The Maine Office of Cannabis Policy at (207) 287-3282 or visit maine.gov/dafs/ocp.

Overview

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUTH CANNABIS USE?

WEED CAN MESS WITH TEEN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

You might have laughed at your own parent's warning that "smoking weed kills brain cells," but research is starting to show just how vulnerable the brain is before we're in our mid-20s. Because teen brains are still growing, cannabis can negatively impact the parts of the brain responsible for memory formation, attention, coordination, and emotional regulation.

How can using cannabis affect teens?



- **It can impact school performance** by making it harder to learn, remember, and pay attention.¹



- **It can increase the risk of lung health problems** like chronic coughing, bronchitis, and asthma.²



- **It can mess with the development of natural reflexes** and throw off coordination, balance, and reaction time.^{1,3}
- **Using as a teen can increase the risk of experiencing mental health challenges as an adult**, especially for those already at risk due to genetics.¹

Get a deeper understanding of how cannabis affects the brain on page 6.

Overview

(PART 2)

It helps
with **stress**?

It's
medicinal?

It **fries**
your brain?

It causes
anxiety?

If you're not talking with your teen about cannabis, they might be getting mixed messages

Teens are hearing so many different things about cannabis. All these messages from peers and social media can be confusing and make it even harder for youth to understand the real risks. That's where you come in.

You have an important role to play in preventing teen cannabis use

Being there for the youth in your life—and giving them real, science-based facts about cannabis—is the first step in helping them make more informed choices about using weed. Research shows that kids are less likely to try cannabis and illegal drugs when adults talk with them about the risks and harms of early use.^{3,4}

It might be hard to believe at times, but you are the number one influence on a child's behavior. Parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, teachers, coaches, counselors, and faith leaders can all make a difference in a teen's choices. Even if they act like they're not listening, what you say matters and can have an impact.

Where you can start:

- Educate yourself on the risks of underage use.
- Talk early and often about safe and healthy choices.
- Model safe and healthy behaviors.

Cannabis 101

WHAT SHOULD YOU KNOW
ABOUT TODAY'S CANNABIS?

TIMES HAVE CHANGED, AND SO HAS CANNABIS

Cannabis - a mind-altering (psychoactive) substance that comes from a plant. Also known as *weed*, *marijuana*, *pot*, or *kush*.

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) - the main psychoactive compound in cannabis that creates a high sensation. It has been shown to affect teen brains.

Modern weed is
200%
stronger than it
was in the past^{5,6}

Today's cannabis plants contain much higher amounts of THC than even a few decades ago. Because of this, the effects are stronger and longer-lasting and can have a big impact on the teen brain during the sensitive time while it's growing.

TODAY'S CANNABIS COMES IN MANY DIFFERENT FORMS

ABSORBED CANNABIS



PILLS

Cannabis that is swallowed in the form of a capsule or tablet



EDIBLES

Cannabis that is infused in drinks or combined with food (gummies, chocolate, baked goods) and consumed



TINCTURES

Cannabis liquids that are mixed with drinks or placed under the tongue with a dropper or syringe



LOZENGES/FILMS

Cannabis concentrates that are made to dissolve in the mouth

INHALED CANNABIS



PRE-ROLLS

Rolling papers or smoking papers filled with dried cannabis—also known as *flower*—that are pre-rolled into cigarette-like shapes



CONCENTRATES

Cannabis concentrates—also called *dabs*, *shatter*, or *wax*—that are placed in a smoking device



PIPES & BONGS

Devices used for smoking dried flower or cannabis concentrates



VAPES

Vaporizing devices that contain concentrated cannabis oil, which is smoked or vaped

THC & Youth Health Risks

HOW CAN CANNABIS HARM TEEN HEALTH?

THE BRAIN IS STILL GROWING AND FINE-TUNING CONNECTIONS UNTIL OUR MID-20S

When a teen uses weed, it can interfere with the way the brain develops. The active chemical in cannabis, THC, enters the system that regulates body and brain functions. It overwhelms the brain and prevents it from doing its job, making it harder for teens to form memories, stay focused, manage stress, and more.

SOMETIMES THE SIGNS STAY HIDDEN,
BUT YOU MAY NOTICE A TEEN ...

LACKING MOTIVATION

It might not be teen angst. THC can make kids act less like themselves because it reduces the chemicals in the **basal ganglia** that let us feel pleasure, satisfaction, and motivation.^{7,8,9,10}

FORGETTING WHAT MATTERS MOST

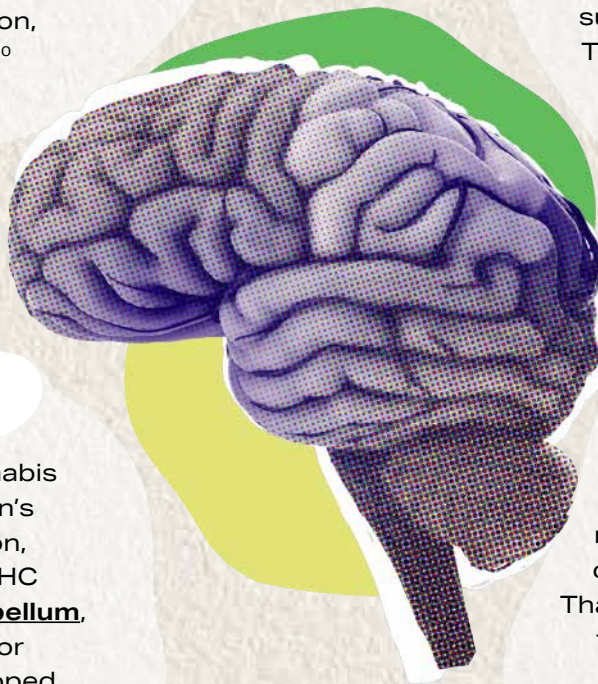
Struggling to remember even the little things could be a sign of cannabis use. The teen brain is still growing, making it more susceptible to the effects of THC, which can disrupt how memories form in the **hippocampus** and cause forgetfulness.¹¹

GETTING OFF-BALANCE

Athletic or not, cannabis can mess with a teen's balance, coordination, and reaction time. THC can affect the **cerebellum**, where all of our motor functions are developed and managed.¹¹

FEELING MORE STRESS

Some teenage stress is normal, but cannabis use could be making it worse. That's because THC affects the **amygdala**, which can impact a teen's ability to manage their emotions and cause anxiety.¹²



THC & Youth Health Risks

(PART 2)

STUDIES SHOW THAT CANNABIS CAN HARM TEEN MENTAL HEALTH

From school to social media, kids often experience stress and anxiety on a regular basis. Using weed to self-medicate has become a common coping method. But the fact is, underage use is linked to negative mental health effects.

2x more likely to have depression

Using weed can increase a teen's chance of developing mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and even thoughts of suicide.^{13,14,15}

Increased risk of psychosis

Youth who use weed, especially those who are genetically at risk, are more likely to experience temporary hallucinations and paranoia, as well as long-lasting disorders like schizophrenia.¹

4-7x more likely to become dependent

Teens who start using cannabis before age 18 could have a more difficult time quitting later on in life.¹⁶



Cannabis can have long-lasting effects on teenage lungs

We all know smoke is harmful to lung health because of the toxins and carcinogens that are released. Even cannabis smoke contains chemicals like ammonia, hydrocyanic acid, nitrosamines, and many of the components of tar. When teens inhale all of that, they increase their risk of developing lung problems like chronic cough, bronchitis, and asthma.¹⁷

Self-medicating with cannabis can come with risks

If you think a teen would benefit from medically prescribed cannabis, talk to a licensed healthcare professional before allowing them to use it. They will assess your child, discuss the possible risks, efficacy, and goals of the treatment, and track any progress or setbacks.¹⁸

A simple conversation can help protect teens' health. Talk with kids and encourage them to learn more about the risks of underage cannabis use.

Tips for Talking with Youth About Cannabis

SHOULD I TALK WITH A TEEN ABOUT CANNABIS?

NO MATTER HOW AWKWARD THE TALK MAY BE, TEENS REALLY ARE LISTENING

Use these tips to start the conversation:



Start early

Normalize talking about cannabis before kids consider experimenting. It could be as young as 10 years old or when they first start asking questions.



Keep it two-way

Instead of talking at teens, talk with them. Actively listening to their thoughts without judgment and encouraging questions helps show that you care.



Stick to the facts

Exaggerations may result in eye rolls. Base your conversation on science, like how underage use can impact brain growth and mental health.



Keep it casual

Family meetings and lectures can be intimidating for kids. Find casual moments, like in the car or on the way to school, to chat about cannabis.

DON'T SAY:

"Sit down. We need to talk."

"Because I said so."

"Everyone gets stressed, just deal with it."

DO SAY:

"Got a minute? I want to know what you think."

"Because I want the best for you and science is starting to show risks for teens that use."

"I care about your mental health and weed may actually make stress harder to handle."

Tips for Talking with Youth About Cannabis

(PART 2)

BE READY WITH ANSWERS FOR ALL THE HARD QUESTIONS—OR COMEBACKS—THAT GET THROWN YOUR WAY

"But it's natural."

"That doesn't mean it's safe for you right now. Even though it's from a plant, cannabis contains the chemical THC. Because your brain is growing, the effects of THC are stronger and can impact how your brain functions, even causing long-term damage."¹

"There are worse things I could be doing, like tobacco or other drugs."

"Every substance is harmful in different ways, and using cannabis underage can come with risks. While your brain is growing, it's making new connections. Many substances, including weed, can interrupt that growth process and cause harm."¹

"I heard it's good for mental health."

"Science is always evolving, and today we know a lot more about how weed affects kids. When you're a teen and growing, THC can throw your body's natural chemical production out of balance, making feelings of stress and anxiety worse instead of better."¹²

"If it's so bad, why is it legal?"

"Good question. Cannabis is only legal for adults over 21. Your brain doesn't finish growing until you're in your mid-20s. If you use weed before then, THC can harm your hippocampus, cerebellum, and amygdala—putting your memory, attention span, coordination, and mental health at risk."¹

"But so many successful people use it."

"That's a good point, but everyone is different, and what you see on social media isn't always the full picture. Avoiding underage cannabis use is the best way to let your brain grow to its full potential."¹

"Didn't you use weed when you were young?"

"I did, but back then we didn't know it could harm teen brains, and weed wasn't as strong. Cannabis today contains much higher amounts of THC than even 10 years ago. Any amount of THC is harmful to your brain, but the higher concentrations in modern weed come with big impacts too."^{5,6}

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Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Provides information on the risks of cannabis use

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Provides data, information, and FAQs on cannabis

Maine Crisis Line

Provides judgment-free support for parents

Good to Know Maine

Provides information on youth cannabis prevention