



# CANNABIS TALK KIT

KNOW HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR TEEN

SECOND EDITION

#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 pot) can help them make informed decisions. It’s more important than ever for parents to address this issue early and often - to help prevent underage use and protect their kids’ health and development.

It’s important to understand that expressing curiosity does not always result in experimentation. It’s natural for youth to feel curious and have questions about cannabis use.

That’s why we created this talk kit. We want to help families navigate together through the new cannabis landscape – one that includes the legalization and regulation of cannabis for non-medical or recreational use. We also hope to spark a discussion on cannabis products that will become legal in fall 2019; including edibles such as cannabis-infused foods or beverages and concentrates such as hashish or hash oil, waxes or shatter.

You’ll learn how to set the stage to have an open dialogue with your pre-teen or teen. Your kids 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.**

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

## What is cannabis?

Cannabis 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.<sup>1</sup>

The main active chemical in cannabis is THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol). Of the roughly 400 chemicals found in the cannabis plant, THC has the greater impact on the body and the brain. It is a mind-altering chemical that gives those who use cannabis a high. Another active chemical in cannabis is CBD (cannabidiol), which is becoming increasingly known for its potential medical properties and ability to moderate the effects of THC.

Learn more about medical cannabis at [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca)

## What does it look like?

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

## What are some terms for Cannabis?

Marijuana, bud, blunt, chronic, dab, dope, ganja, grass, green, hash, herb, joint, loud, mary jane, mj, pot, reefer, sinsemilla, 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 not dangerous and easy to get — maybe even easier than alcohol.

## *Cannabis for Medical Purposes*

Under the Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Act, cannabis for medical use can be legally obtained with the authorization from a physician or nurse practitioner – and Canadians can access safe, quality-controlled cannabis from a producer licensed by Health Canada. For more information: **CCSA's Clearing the Smoke on Cannabis: Medical Use of Cannabis and Cannabinoids.**

<sup>1</sup> 2015 Canadian Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey (CTADS)

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) 2016

## How is cannabis used recreationally?

Cannabis can be used in several ways, both for medical and non-medical purposes.

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, such as hash, 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 extracts, with concentrated levels of THC, such as waxes and shatter, which are consumed by heating them and inhaling the smoke or vapour, and tinctures and oils, which can be ingested orally.

Cannabis can also be brewed as tea, infused into drinks or mixed into food and ingested as edible candies, cookies and brownies.<sup>3</sup>

Eating homemade cannabis products like brownies or cookies is considered by some youth to be a less risky way of consuming than smoking it. Consuming cannabis orally can take one to two hours for the effects to be felt, which can last approximately eight to twelve hours. A long waiting time is recommended with ingesting cannabis products to avoid accumulation of effects.

It’s important to note that the sale of cannabis concentrates and edibles containing cannabis will not be legal until fall 2019.

Only licensed producers grow cannabis products that can be purchased legally in Canada. Available evidence suggests that illegal cannabis can be contaminated with pesticides and harmful chemicals.<sup>4</sup> Synthetic cannabinoids like K2 or Spice should be completely avoided.

Learn more about cannabis at [drugfreekidscanada.org](http://drugfreekidscanada.org).

## 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.

## Frequency of cannabis use



The frequency of use by young people varies substantially. Many kids will not use cannabis at all, others will only experiment once or twice, or use intermittently in social situations, while some young people report using cannabis regularly. Parents of youth who are using more frequently or are concerned about problematic substance use can get more information in **CCSA’s Cannabis Communication Guide**.

<sup>3</sup> CCSA, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Journal of Toxicology, 2013 Nicholas Sullivan et al.

## Who is using it?

The rate of cannabis use is two times higher among Canadian youth aged 15-24 as compared to adults.<sup>5</sup> One in five teens aged between 15 and 19 have used cannabis in the past year.<sup>6</sup> In 2017 cannabis use increased in Ontario with high school grade level to a high of 36.9 % among 12th grade students.<sup>7</sup> Cannabis use is more prevalent among males than females, although the rate of use among females is on the rise.<sup>8</sup>

## 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.<sup>9</sup>

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

There is no single reason why 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.<sup>10</sup>

A teen may also use cannabis to self medicate - as a way to help them sleep, stimulate the appetite, or reduce worry and stress.<sup>11</sup>

(continued on page 5)

5 CTADS 2017

6 CTADS 2017

7 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) 2017 reported High School use of cannabis: Gr. 9-9.3%, Gr. 10-19.9%, Gr. 11-30.4%, Gr. 12-36.9%

8 CTADS 2017

9 CCSA, 2015; Beirness and Porath 2017

10, 11 McKiernan & Fleming (2017) Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis, CCSA

## Vaping and Cannabis



Vaping has significantly grown in popularity, especially among youth who have the perception that it is a harmless alternative to smoking.

About one quarter of grade 7 to 12 students from across Canada have reported trying a vaping product and 53% of all students thought it would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” to get a vaping product if they wanted one\*.

Vaping is the inhalation of aerosol or vapour of an oil or e-liquid, most often composed of propylene glycol or vegetable glycerine-based liquid with nicotine flavouring and other chemicals.

Cannabis oils or other extracts with concentrated levels of THC, such as hash oil, can be vaporized using an e-cigarette or other vaping device or mixed with dried cannabis and smoked. People can also consume dried cannabis in a cartridge with an e-cigarette device.

Vaping concentrates can expose people to higher levels of the mind-altering chemical ingredient of cannabis – THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol).

When cannabis is vaped it does not produce the tell-tale smell of smoking cannabis through a joint, blunt or pipe. Teens and young adults can consume cannabis more discreetly using a vaporizer than with a joint, blunt, pipe, or e-cigarette using dried cannabis.

\*Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2016-2017

If a teen is using cannabis to cope, they may be more likely to continue if it works for them. They may think, *“When I feel stressed out, I smoke pot and it relaxes me.”* They may continue to use cannabis instead of finding healthy behaviours as alternatives - like sports, hanging out with a friend, playing music, talking to someone about their feelings, or reading a book – that can help in coping with the stress they feel.

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

Cannabis is an addictive substance. The risk of developing dependence is one in six among those who start using cannabis frequently during adolescence.<sup>12</sup>

Regular cannabis use among adolescents is associated with an increased risk of experiencing long term 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 over time.<sup>13</sup>

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,<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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

It has an affect on the brain's reward system – as do all other addictive drugs - the likelihood of developing problem use or addiction increases considerably for those who start young.<sup>17</sup>

12-13-14-16 George & Vaccarino, 2015

15 Meier et al, (2012)

17 Drug Alcohol Depend, Winters & Lee, 2008

## How do I know if my teen is using?

Teens will be teens. As parents we know that adolescence is an important transition period both biologically and socially for our children. They sleep late, their groups of friends change, they can be moody and they may have on-again, off-again trouble in school. These changes can be normal for any adolescent. So how would you know if your teen is using cannabis or other drugs?

### *Changes 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

It is important not to jump to the conclusion that any changes in your child's behaviour are because of cannabis or other substance use. If you do notice these changes, you have a good opportunity to take the time and have an open and balanced discussion with your pre-teen or teen, to educate, empower and support your child as they navigate through their teenage years.

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.**

### *“Cannabis is not a benign drug!”*

“Pine River Institute works with adolescents with addictive behaviors. For many of the youth we work with, cannabis is their drug of choice. Most of these teens believed that cannabis 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 new cannabis landscape

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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.<sup>18</sup>

Although cannabis is now legal in Canada, it doesn't change the fact that all mind-altering substances — including cannabis — can impact the still-developing teen brain. Explore with them the impact of early use of these substances in a child's life and explain to them that the use of any of these substances while still in their teens or younger can significantly increase the risk of problems with their health, education and social life.

Help your underage child understand that you don't want them to use cannabis, the same way that you don't want them to smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol, and that you will always be there to answer questions they may have about substance use as they get older.

## Cannabis and the law

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### Non-Medical Cannabis is now legal in Canada.

On October 17, 2018, the **Cannabis Act** came into force, allowing adults to use cannabis for non-medical purposes. It ensures a strict legal framework for the control of production, distribution, sale and possession of cannabis in Canada.

Adults of legal age\* are now able to possess up to 30 grams of dried cannabis purchased from a licensed retail outlet.

Laws are not identical in all provinces and territories. It is important to be aware of how cannabis is being sold and where adults are able to use cannabis in your area.

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addition - [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca) - has compiled **a resource** that summarizes provincial and territorial regulations across the country.

It is illegal for adults to provide or sell cannabis to youth and those who do may face criminal penalties, including up to 14 years in jail.

Under the **Cannabis Act**, access to cannabis for medical purposes continues to be provided to those who have obtained the authorization of their healthcare practitioner.

Legal age for cannabis varies between 18 and 19 years, depending on the province or territory. At the time of publication, Quebec is proposing to raise the minimum age to 21 years.

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



## **Cannabis and the teen brain**

The parts of the adolescent brain which develop first are those that control physical coordination, emotion and motivation. The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that controls reasoning and impulses, does not fully mature until around the age of 25.<sup>19</sup>

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 behavior, such as:

- difficulty holding back or controlling emotions
- a preference for high-excitement and low-effort activities
- poor planning and judgment (rarely thinking of negative consequences)
- more risky, impulsive behaviours, including experimenting with drugs and alcohol<sup>20</sup>

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 regular use of cannabis during the teen years may interfere with school performance.<sup>21</sup>

Teens are more likely to engage in risky behaviours than any other age group.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

### *How do I know the time is right?*



If you are concerned about your kid using drugs and you begin to notice items in your home associated with drug use such as rolling papers, cigars, pipes etc., the time is right to start a conversation with them. For practical information on how to begin an open dialogue and continue to engage in meaningful conversations with your pre-teen or teen, see page 11.

19 George & Vaccarino 2015

20 Bava & Tapert 2010 Adolescent brain development and the risk for alcohol and other drug problems. *Neuropsychology Review*

21 CCSA 2016 Chronic Cannabis Use Effects Report

22 Steinberg 2008

23 Kann et al 2014

## **Cannabis and driving**

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It is illegal to drive while impaired by cannabis. Drug-impaired driving has the same penalties as alcohol-impaired driving.

Driving after consuming cannabis raises the risk of a crash. Yet many young people still get behind the wheel after smoking pot. Among youth who have used cannabis in the past 12 months, 27.8% of those aged 16 to 19 and 43.1% of 20 to 24 year olds reported having driven within 2 hours of using cannabis.<sup>24</sup>

Many young people get into a car with a driver who has consumed cannabis. 40.9% of youth 16 to 19 and 55.6% of those 20 to 24 reported being a passenger in a vehicle driven by someone who had used cannabis in the past 2 hours.<sup>25</sup>

In 2017, youth who participated in a qualitative research study by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction believed that cannabis-impaired driving was safer, or less dangerous, than alcohol-impaired driving. This belief was partly related to the fact that youth didn't associate the feelings of being high (calm, happy, and relaxed) with risky behaviours that could impair driving skills.<sup>26</sup>

Cannabis use can affect a person's reaction time, attention and coordination as well as their judgement, all of which can have a significant impact on driving ability.<sup>27</sup>

Four out of ten fatally injured drivers who had used cannabis before the crash were between 16 and 24 years of age.<sup>28</sup>

24 Canadian Cannabis Survey, 2017

25 Canadian Cannabis Survey, 2017

26 McKiernan, A., & Fleming, K. (2017). Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

27 Beirness D.J., & Porath, A.J. (2017). Clearing the Smoke on Cannabis: Cannabis Use and Driving – An Update. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

28 Beirness, D.J., Beasley, E.E., & Boase, P. (2013). Drug use among fatally injured drivers in Canada. In B. Watson & M. Sheehan (Eds.), Proceedings of the International Conference on Alcohol, Drugs

## Cannabis and Alcohol

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While some teens may argue that cannabis is safer than alcohol, the results from one survey show that teens don't typically use alcohol OR cannabis; they use both, often at the same time<sup>29</sup> - a dangerous combination, especially while driving.

The use of cannabis alone is enough to cause impairment. Mixing cannabis with alcohol can significantly further increase impairment. 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).<sup>30</sup>

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 drug use.<sup>31</sup>

### *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)

29 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study 2013

30 National Cannabis information and support

31 CCSA 2016

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

Talking to teenagers about difficult subjects like drugs and alcohol can be a challenge for some parents. However, creating a safe and receptive environment to begin a conversation with your teen can promote open and positive communication.

\* **Please note: We are sensitive to the value of gender neutrality, and although we do use language that refers to male and female children – we have also tried to use neutral pronouns to be more inclusive.**

## Get in the right frame of mind

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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, he or 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, you 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.** Establish what you hope to achieve and understand your goals should depend on the age of your child. You may have a very different set of goals for an underage teen than you would for a teen who is of legal age to consume cannabis. Developing goals in collaboration with your pre-teen or teen is important. The idea is to work together, parent and child, to achieve common objectives.

### 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 he or 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 her or 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 – Engage.** A lecture can cause your teen to shut down, get angry or tune you out. Any language with a negative focus, like disapproval or shaming, can be perceived as a scare tactic. Engaging your teen in a calm, respectful dialogue that takes into consideration their point of view will be more effective and have a positive effect on future discussions.
- **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 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 he or she is standing, ask them 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.<sup>32</sup> 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 them you're listening the entire time and ask for their input.

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



### Ask permission.

Ask your teen if it's okay to speak with him or her about their concerns, and whether it's okay that you offer some feedback.

**Try:** “Are you okay with me 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?”

<sup>32</sup> 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><b>BUT</b> You did well on your report card <b>but</b> I know you can work even harder.</p>	<p><b>AND</b> You did well on your report card <b>and</b> I know you can work even harder.</p>
<p><b>SHOULD</b> You <b>should</b> stop smoking pot.</p>	<p><b>WOULD LIKE</b> I <b>would like</b> to talk about why you smoke pot - can we explore healthier alternatives together?</p>
<p><b>BAD</b> Smoking pot is <b>bad</b> for you.</p>	<p><b>HARMFUL</b> Smoking pot is <b>harmful</b> for your health and brain.</p>
<p><b>STUPID</b> Smoking pot is a <b>stupid</b> choice.</p>	<p><b>UNHEALTHY</b> Smoking pot is <b>unhealthy</b> for you, and that's why I'm concerned.</p>
<p><b>DISAPPROVE</b> I <b>disapprove</b> of you hanging out with that group of friends.</p>	<p><b>CONCERNED</b> I am <b>concerned</b> about your group of friends and worry that they may not be the best influence.</p>
<p><b>DISAPPOINTED</b> I am <b>disappointed</b> in you for breaking curfew.</p>	<p><b>WORRIED</b> I am <b>worried</b> about your decision to come home past curfew.</p>
<p><b>CAN'T</b> You <b>can't</b> come home at 11 p.m. on weeknights.</p>	<p><b>DON'T WANT</b> I <b>don't want</b> 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. Continue to create a safe environment for conversation, where you can have a respectful and open dialogue that stays balanced and calm. 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.”	→ <i>Taking responsibility and acknowledging a teen’s feelings is an effective way to reduce resistance.</i>
“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.”	→ <i>This statement shows compassion for what he or she is going through.</i>
“Cannabis is legal in Canada now, and I think it’s important that we talk about it. Would that be OK?”	→ <i>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 them suggest a time when they would be willing to talk.</i>

### 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?”	→ <i>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.</i>



**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 he or 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 them. 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, 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.*

## *Reduce the Harm*

If your teen is already using cannabis – here are some of the things they can do to reduce the impact on their mental and physical health.

- Delay use until the brain is fully developed - approximately age 25.
- Be aware that smoking burnt cannabis can be harmful to the lungs and respiratory system.
- Avoid regular or frequent (daily or near-daily) use.
- Avoid deep inhalation or holding your breath after inhaling.
- Avoid using large amounts, or cannabis with high potency THC (> 10% THC).
- Avoid synthetic cannabinoids (e.g. K2, spice).
- Only use cannabis products purchased legally to ensure they are free from pesticides and contaminants.
- Consider tracking or monitoring your use to understand your use pattern, and when it may be affecting your daily life or becomes hard to control

Check out **The Blunt Truth - Useful tips about safer ways to use cannabis** created by youth for youth.

**YOUR TEEN SAYS:** “Cannabis 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 his or 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 judgment 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.*

“I know some people who have used substances — their use of alcohol or pot has had an impact on their lives.”



*This brings some personal perspective into the conversation, and lets your teen know that you have seen and understand effects of substance use.*

“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.*

### *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:** “But cannabis is legal, why would they make something legal that could hurt me?”

**YOU CAN SAY**

“Cannabis is only legal at a certain age, like alcohol or tobacco. 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?”

**HERE'S WHY**



*Letting your teen know that this is a valid question is important to them 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 and car accidents.”



*Alcohol and tobacco are great examples of regulated substances that have severely harmful side effects.*

“Cigarettes are also legal, even though they are highly addictive and cause cancer, heart disease, and other major health problems. 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**

“Okay. 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 him 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.*

“Ok. So you’ve tried it once. Let’s talk about how often a young person might use. It is important to be aware of the effects associated with frequent use.”



*It's an opportunity to discuss the frequency of use with your teen and understand the harms of more frequent use on young people.*

**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 them what to say or do when they are put in an uncomfortable situation, why not ask them? 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*

“Now that cannabis is legal, a lot of young people may be experimenting with cannabis. My experience in using cannabis when I was younger showed me pot affects people differently. If you choose to use cannabis when you’re of legal age, it’s important to consider your health, your safety and how often you consume.”



*You may want to point out some of the negative things that happened to you (or your) friends that you wish didn’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 judgment.*

*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 behavior 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 behavior for your child (like going for a walk, working out, reading, stretching, deep breathing or 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.

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](http://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](http://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.

## *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](http://drugfreekidscanada.org). Help us continue to help Canadian families. We appreciate your support.

## **Our sincere thanks to:**



For providing the original content and allowing us to adapt it to the Canadian market



for their support in reviewing and advising on the evidence summarized in this brochure.

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### **Additional resources for parents:**

<https://www.drugfreekidscanada.org/prevention/drug-info/cannabis/>

<http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-Cannabis-Communication-Guide-2018-en.pdf>



