

# Why Talk About Marijuana?

by Nancy Pasquale

Why should coalitions - and families - be concerned about marijuana and continue to advocate for science-based policies?

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With fentanyl, xylazine, and fake pills dominating headlines, many people may ask, “why even talk about marijuana?” We are now at a crossroads in the national conversation about drug policy and drug trends. In my mind, having spent nearly a decade working directly with youth in schools and in the community, there has never been a more important time to talk about marijuana. Moreover, for parents and caregivers looking to protect the health and safety of their children, there are compelling reasons why marijuana should be a top prevention priority.

## **Marijuana is one of the “big three”**

When it comes to drug trends, three substances dominate the landscape of youth use: alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana. This is not entirely surprising, given that many teens report using substances “at home” or “at a friend’s house.” With alcohol and nicotine, their legal status for adult use has made them widely available and accessible in homes, and as the legal status of marijuana broadens, its use now approaches that of alcohol. When it comes to initiating substance use, national data show these three drugs far outstrip all others for teens because they are widely available, and their legal status contributes to low perception of risk.

Thanks to advances in technology and brain science, we know that addiction is a pediatric-onset disease: 90% of adults with a substance use disorder began using alcohol, marijuana, or nicotine before age 18 (CASA Columbia). Put another way, teens who start using before age 18 have a one in four chance of developing addiction later as compared to a one in 25 chance for those who delay initiation until age 21 (Partnership to End Addiction, Richter). So not only is focusing on marijuana a good idea, it is imperative if we want to make a real impact on future rates of addiction.

## **For teens, all substance use is connected**

Furthermore, when we focus on preventing/reducing youth marijuana use, we also impact youth use of other substances because, for teens, all substance use is connected. Did you know that teens

who used marijuana in the last month were 5x more likely to drink alcohol, 8x more likely to binge drink, 9x more likely to smoke cigarettes, and 10x more likely to use other illicit drugs (including opioids) than their peers who did not use marijuana in the past month? (DuPont et al, 2018). That same connection is true for alcohol and nicotine, underscoring the need for parents and caring adults to establish clear expectations of no use for reasons of health. Consistent with guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the healthy choice for teens is no use of any substance. But is that goal realistic?

### **Most teens don't use**

The truth is, there has been a decades-long growing trend of non-use among teens. Monitoring the Future data from 2023 shows 62.6% of 12th graders, 76.9% of 10th graders, and 87% of 8th graders did not use any marijuana, alcohol, or nicotine in the past month. So not only is non-use possible, non-use is the norm.

If your teen has never used substances, support and reinforce their healthy choice. If you suspect your teen may have tried substances, it's never too late to start a conversation. And there are available screening tools that can help you determine when (and how) to seek additional help.

### **What can parents/caregivers do?**

- Recognize the important role you play and be that trusted adult for young people you care about.
- Use current events nationally and locally to start conversations. Talk Early. Talk Often. There are tools that can help.
- Reflect on your own relationship with substances and model healthy choices. Limit adult substance use when youth are present.
- Monitor/lock up substances in your own home. Remember, teens often access Rx drugs, alcohol, and increasingly, marijuana/THC products at home or in friends' homes. Don't provide substances to youth and make a commitment NOT to allow youth substance use in your home.
- Recognize signs of substance use and act quickly if you suspect use. Start with a conversation. Enlist professional help when needed.

Reducing the prevalence of addiction begins with us—and with prevention.