
How To Talk With Your Teen About: Marijuana



Your teen's brain is not fully developed until he is in his mid-20s ... and especially susceptible to the negative effects of any and all drug use.

Marijuana, legal or otherwise, is a hot topic, so it is more important than ever for parents to protect their kids' health and development by addressing this issue early and often.

Why Talking About Marijuana Matters

The new marijuana landscape doesn't change the fact that all substances — including marijuana — are harmful for the still-developing [teen brain](#). Your teen's brain is not fully developed until he is in his mid-20s. During the adolescent years, your teen is especially susceptible to the negative effects of any and all drug use. Marijuana use directly affects the parts of the brain responsible for memory, learning and attention. Scientific evidence shows that marijuana use during the teen years can permanently lower a person's IQ and interfere with other aspects of functioning and well-being.¹

Not only is the mentality around marijuana changing, but the dialogue used to talk with your teen about drugs is as well. Research shows that lecturing, tough love, using scare tactics and one-way conversations are highly ineffective in getting your points and concerns heard by teenagers. So what should this new drug talk look like? It involves open and positive communication, active listening, open-ended questions, objectivity, empathy and specific language that avoids polarizing words such as disapprove, bad, stupid and disappoint. Many parents fear that if they don't use these old tactics their teen won't be fully aware of the harm it can cause and that it isn't that big of a deal to you. None of these fears are true. The tools that we will provide you with in this guide will actually give you more insight into your teen's life and the way they think about marijuana, as well as allow you to address your concerns about marijuana use in the most effective way. Kids who learn a lot about the risks of drugs at home are significantly less likely to use.²

Marijuana: How to Talk to Your Teen

While every conversation will pan out differently and some of these responses may not work for your specific situation, here are some examples of how you can talk to your teen and answer some of the tough questions about pot that he may ask you, and the reasons why these responses may work.

Since marijuana affects people differently, some don't develop a dependence or addiction to marijuana — and some do. Yes, marijuana can be addictive. About 1 in 6 teens who use marijuana at least once increase their risk for addiction (which means they can't stop when they want to, even though it undermines many aspects of their lives).³

“I know, I know. You’ve talked with me about this before.”

Your response: “I know we’ve had conversations about drugs before, and I’m sorry if you feel like I’m being a nag. I want us to be able to discuss difficult topics because I love you and I want to be of help during these years when you’re faced with a lot of difficult choices. My concern is that the drug landscape is drastically changing, and that’s why it’s important that we talk about it. Would that be okay?”

Why: Taking responsibility and acknowledging a teen’s feelings is an effective way to reduce resistance. With this response, you are showing compassion for what your teen is going through, and asking permission to talk will empower your teen and promote open communication. If you receive a “NO” in response, ask why, and then have your teen suggest a time to talk later.

Still stumped?
Check out our [Parent Talk Kit](#) >

“I’m only doing it once in a while on the weekends, so it’s no big deal.”

Your response: “I’m happy to hear that this is not something you do on a regular basis. My concern is, using any drug can be harmful at your age because your brain is still developing. I heard you say that you don’t think it’s a big deal. What would make it feel like a big deal to you? What are some things that keep you from using pot more often than you already do?”

Why: Even though a parent may want her teen to be completely abstinent, it is imperative to point out the positives — 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. This response includes questions – which shows you’re reflecting on your teen’s answers — and gets your teen to think about the future and what her boundaries are around drug use. It will give you insight into what is important to her, and where she doesn’t want drugs interfering. If use progresses and some of these boundaries are crossed, you can then bring that up.

The last question (“What are some things that keep you from using pot more than you do?”) makes your teen think about the reasons why she doesn’t want to smoke pot more often. It again allows her to think about what pot use would interfere with if she did it more regularly. This promotes healthy behavior.

Still stumped?
Read [Marijuana: Facts Parents Need to Know](#) >

“Would you rather I drink alcohol? Weed is so much safer.”

When kids hear about legal marijuana, their natural inclination is to believe that marijuana is not dangerous. But this simply isn’t true — particularly when it comes to teen use. In fact, the “alcohol vs. marijuana” safety debate is actually a false choice. First, because research shows that teens don’t typically

Today's pot has a much higher potency (e.g. the THC concentration has been increasing steadily). In 2012, THC concentrations in marijuana averaged 15%, compared to around 4% in the 1980s. Some current strands contain as much as 30% THC.⁴

use one OR the other; they use both, often at the same time — a dangerous combination. Secondly, if teens use either weed or alcohol, they risk harming their developing brains.

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

Why: Your teen is asking you a question that can easily throw you off course. If it rattles you, giving 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 from your teen, 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.” Being genuinely curious about your teen’s thought process is going to help lower resistance, open up more and think about the statement he just made.

Still stumped?

Get tips on [How to Talk to Your Child at Every Age](#) >

“You smoked weed in college. Don’t pretend like you didn’t.”

Perhaps you smoked pot when you were younger. The fact that you’ve had experiences with marijuana may actually work in your favor. When talking to your kids about pot, remember: this isn’t about what you did or didn’t do. It’s about the choices your child is going to make. You can use your experiences to help your kids understand the risks of using.

You may be caught off guard, but our advice? Don’t lie. You risk losing credibility if your kids discover the real story from another family member or source. It is best to be honest about the fact that you have tried pot — without glamorizing your experiences — and to keep the focus on your kid’s health. You can let her know that while you did try pot, your judgment was compromised and that could have led to more serious consequences; and that you always want your child to be healthy, make good decisions and be the most healthy version of herself as possible.

Still stumped?

Learn more about [How to Talk to Your Kids About Drugs if You Did Drugs](#) >

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

Your response: “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. People I know who use alcohol or pot on a regular basis are using it to numb themselves or avoid feelings. I would much rather you do other things to help you cope with difficult feel-

Research suggests that as a parent, you can be very influential in preventing progression from occasional use to heavy use.⁵

ings, rather than turning to drugs in order to avoid them. Can we brainstorm healthy activities that make you feel better?"

Why: The statement points out that you are not using scare tactics and are realistic and reasonable. It also redirects your teen back to your goal of helping her understand the harmful side effects of marijuana. You're also bringing some personal perspective into the conversation, and letting your teen know that you see the effects of substance use in your own life.

"Come on, I only did it once and I'm totally fine."

Your response: "Okay. Why did you do it only once? Why did you stop, or decide not to do it again? Will you tell me about your experience? I'm genuinely curious to know what that was like for you."

Why: 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. Asking open-ended questions will help you collect information about what he might have liked about getting high or not liked about it.

While it may be more difficult to convince your teen that marijuana is unsafe or unhealthy if she comes out of the experience unharmed, you can still make sure she is aware of the risks we've discussed here. Also, you can tell her that while her first experience was OK, the next time might not be.

The most important thing is to remember that you, as a parent, have the power to influence your teens. One of the most cited factors teens give on why they choose not to use is "disappointing their parents." Whether your child chooses to use or not, it is important to remind her of the risks, that you do not want her to use, and that you are there to help. Research suggests that you, as a parent, can be very influential in preventing progression from occasional use to heavy use.⁵ So even if your kid admits to having tried pot, that doesn't mean you should throw in the towel. It just means you may have to work harder to make sure that your teen's marijuana use doesn't become more frequent or harmful. Remember, outside help (school counselors, family doctor, therapist, etc.) is always an option to help you get your teen back on the right track.

Still stumped?

Find answers at [I Know My Child is Using](#); our [Intervention eBook](#); and consider calling our toll-free parents [Helpline](#) at 1-855-DRUGFREE >

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¹ "Persistent cannabis users show neuropsychological decline from childhood to midlife." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences

² Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) 2013

³ "Comparative epidemiology of dependence on tobacco, alcohol, controlled substances, and inhalants: Basic findings from the National Comorbidity Survey." *Experiential and Clinical Psychopharmacology*

⁴ 2014 National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) based on marijuana samples confiscated by law enforcement agencies

⁵ 2013 PATS