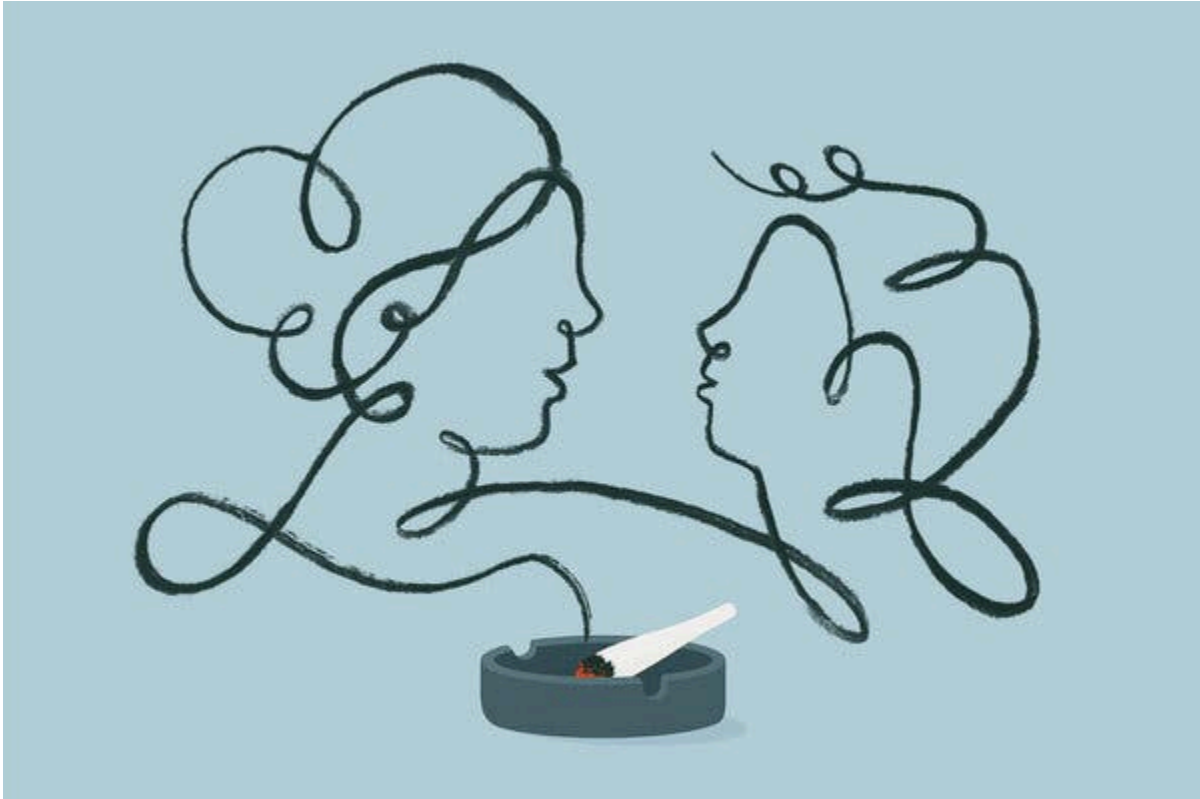


How to Talk to Teens About Cannabis (So They Won't Ignore You)

Keep it brief, do your homework ... and maybe don't share your own teenage pot stories.



Credit...Francesco Ciccolella

By [Catherine Pearson](#)

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It's sold as gummies and cookies. It can be dabbed or vaped. And, depending on where you live, it may be available in dispensaries, inside products much more potent than anything that came before.

Talking to teenagers about cannabis has never been easy, but now it can feel like a minefield.

"It is really, really hard to be a parent right now," said Samuel Meisel, a clinical psychologist and research scientist with Bradley Hospital and the Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies at the Brown University School of Public Health.

Marijuana use among teenagers in the United States [has steadily climbed](#) over the past three decades, as has the [percentage of teenagers who view it as harmless](#). And many fear that growing legalization has [removed barriers to access for kids](#) looking to experiment, even though cannabis remains illegal for people under 21.

On top of this, the concentration of THC — the main psychoactive compound in cannabis — has soared in recent years. [In the mid-1990s](#), the average concentration of THC in cannabis samples was about [4 percent](#); by 2017, it was [17 percent](#), and some products now have [THC levels above 90 percent](#). All of which has troubling implications for children’s developing brains and their overall health.

“Cannabis is portrayed as a relatively harmless substance, but the data amongst teenagers does not support that,” Dr. Meisel said. “It’s shown to impact IQ. It’s associated with the [onset of psychotic syndrome](#). It’s associated with worsening mental health conditions, depression and anxiety, and the onset of those conditions as well.”

We spoke to Dr. Meisel and others who work in adolescent medicine, mental health and addiction about some of their go-to strategies for talking to tweens and teens about cannabis.

Make your rules and expectations clear.

If your hope is to prevent underage cannabis use, your first step should be to make your disapproval plain, Dr. Meisel said. Obvious? Perhaps. But [research](#) has linked defined, cannabis-specific rules to lower use among adolescents.

“Make sure your family rules are clear about what’s OK and what’s not,” he said, adding that conversations about cannabis should start as early as fourth or fifth grade. Those expectations should be a part of your regular and ongoing family discussions around things like chores, schoolwork and general respect within the household, he said.

Be sure to outline what the consequences are for breaking those rules, Dr. Meisel said, though those conversations should not be “punitive” or “fear-provoking.” Parents should frame rules and consequences as things they are establishing because they love their child and want to keep him or her safe, he said.

Dr. Pantea Farahmand, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Child Study Center at NYU Langone, echoed this advice. She said parents should emphasize that if children get into a situation where they feel unsafe, they should call and expect a kind of temporary amnesty, meaning their parents won’t immediately yell at or punish them.

“The kid should know their safety is the No. 1 thing,” she said.

Do your research.

All of the experts interviewed for this story encouraged parents to learn about the unique risks of cannabis use for teenagers, pointing to resources like the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which offers [strategies for talking to teenagers about drugs and alcohol](#).

“Legalization of things does not mean it’s not harmful,” said Dr. Jessi Gold, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis who specializes in college mental health. “Cigarettes are legal. Alcohol is legal.” She said she worried that some young adults were taking legalization to mean “this should never have been a problem, this is totally fine.”

Dr. Gold said that, with her college-age patients, focusing on the ways cannabis can impede their daily lives, including [hampering memory and attention](#), can be particularly effective. “I have a lot of

patients who smoke pretty regularly and don't tend to see how that affects mood, sleep, concentration, motivation — but it does.”

It can also be helpful for parents to stay up to speed on how cannabis is being consumed and sold, said Dr. Sarper Taskiran, a senior child and adolescent psychiatrist with the Child Mind Institute in New York City. This way, parents know what to look out for — edibles, for instance, [can appear harmless and are easy to hide](#) — and they can better connect with their children. He often asks his patients why they don't open up to their parents, and teenagers sometimes say that their parents seem out of touch.

“They're assuming parents don't have any idea about the world of marijuana,” he said, “especially the gummies, the vapes, the dabs, the other delivery systems. So that's why they're like, ‘OK, this is not their territory. They wouldn't understand.’”

Be careful about sharing your own experiences with cannabis.

Some parents used cannabis as teenagers; others use it currently. There is no clear consensus on how they should respond if their children ask whether they have ever used cannabis, but experts say to proceed thoughtfully.

The Partnership to End Addiction, for instance, [discourages parents](#) from lying to their children, but notes that not answering is a viable option. The group also emphasizes that parents should avoid giving more information than is necessary (“No need to reveal you smoked marijuana 132 times!”) and that it can be useful to frame your response in terms of what you learned. One sample script: “I thought I needed to try drugs to fit in. It took me a while to discover that's never a very good reason to do anything. Do you ever feel pressured like that?”

Others urge more caution. “I wouldn't recommend that parents talk about what their own experience may have been when they were younger,” Dr. Farahmand said. “It's not the same.” The potencies are higher now, the options more varied. “It's a different playing field,” she said.

She added that she had worked with teenage patients who used their parents' words against them, saying some version of “I don't understand why my mom is so upset with me. She used to get high and go into the bushes and make out with boys all the time.”

Ask open-ended questions — especially about their friends.

One misstep parents make in conversations about cannabis is feeling they have a message they must deliver, Dr. Taskiran said. Instead, he encouraged parents to think of themselves as sounding boards and to focus on asking open-ended questions.

“The best starter conversations usually happen with what's going on in their school,” Dr. Taskiran said. You might ask: Do any of your friends talk about using cannabis? Do they use it in social situations or to help themselves sleep or if they are feeling anxious? Leading with questions about peers can help ease you both into the conversation, he added, and it can be a useful way to establish that you won't immediately leap to judgment and anger.

“If parents don't respond with ‘Oh my god! Is Dylan really smoking weed in the bathroom?’” then it's more likely their own kid will open up about any experimentation, he said.

Keep it brief and warm.

Dr. Meisel led a [small 2022 study](#) that found if parents approached a conversation about cannabis with warmth and support, it was associated with decreased use and decreased intention to use in their teenage children.

To create a warm environment, keep your body language relaxed, pause to check on how your child is feeling or to see if he or she has any questions — and then actively listen to the response, he said.

Strive to keep the talks brief — usually no longer than one to five minutes, Dr. Farahmand estimated. The long, formal version sometimes portrayed in TV or movies is really the opposite of what parents should strive for, she said.

“We want children to retain the information and stay attentive,” she said.

Be creative about your openings.

If your teenager is loath to have even a brief conversation about cannabis, use natural openings to your advantage, Dr. Taskiran said. If you see or smell someone smoking when you’re out for a walk, for instance, that can be a good time to ask an open-ended question or two.

Dr. Meisel said that parents may find it easier to have some of these check-ins via text, and that they should be creative about how they connect — particularly if their child is going through a prickly phase.

“If they are not wanting to sit down and have family meals or watch ‘The Mandalorian’ with you or whatever it might be, then monitoring is going to be really important,” he said. He noted that parents should make clear that they’re paying attention to things like whom their child is spending time with and what they’re doing together. “Having clear-cut rules is going to be really important,” said Dr. Meisel. “Maintaining warmth — even when your teen is at a distance — is going to be important.”

Dr. Gold encouraged parents to view conversations about cannabis as a marathon, not a sprint, and to persist if their child does not “take the bait” right away.

“Maybe your kid is going to hear you say one thing, roll their eyes, and go upstairs and slam the door,” she said — but your role as a caregiver is to follow up the next day or whenever you sense another opening and try again. Dr. Gold suggested this response: “I’m not going to push you, but I want to have this conversation at some point. Please tell me how I can have this conversation with you.”