



Talking to Teens about Cannabis

A resource guide for service
providers working with
adolescents



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The content in this document is relevant to IC&RC Prevention Specialist Domains 2, 3 and 6, and ATOD topics.

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Talking with Teens about Cannabis:

A Resource Guide for Service Providers working with Adolescents

As cannabis laws change and more THC products become available, it's important for professionals who work with teens, like healthcare providers, counselors, educators, and prevention professionals, to be ready to talk with young people and their parents about the potential risks.

THC is the main chemical in cannabis that causes a "high." Today's cannabis products often contain very high levels of THC, which can be harmful to a teen's developing brain, learning, and mental health. Because the part of the brain that helps with decision-making and self-control (the prefrontal cortex) isn't fully developed until about age 25, using cannabis at a young age increases the risk of long-term problems like addiction, poor impulse control, or even psychosis. Despite these risks, cannabis is becoming easier to get and more socially accepted, and there's still a lot of confusion and misinformation about its effects.

This guide provides guidance and strategies on how to have productive conversations about cannabis use in a way that fosters self-reflection and continued conversation, drawing from evidence-based practices like Motivational Interviewing.

How to use this guide:

This science-informed resource guide provides information and talking points for healthcare teams, counselors, and other service providers when addressing cannabis use with adolescents and affected families.

Those who work directly with teens: Review the information and tips provided in this document for more effective communication about cannabis use with the young people you serve.

Parents/caregivers: Review the parent information (page 15) and fact sheet.

Prevention professionals: Review the information and incorporate into your work if you work with youth. Share this guide with healthcare teams, behavioral health teams, school counselors and others in your community who serve adolescents.

Individual-level approaches in prevention

The strategies discussed in this guide address behavior change at an individual level. However, other factors such as family, school and social environments, policies that affect availability and access to substances, and more, also influence whether someone will misuse substances like cannabis. Prevention strategies that address individuals may be more effective if they are part of a broader approach that also promotes prevention within families and communities, through policy change, changes to the environment, and changes in attitudes and beliefs within the community.

Cannabis terminology:

This document uses the terms **cannabis** and **marijuana**, both in reference to the dried leaves, flowers, stems and seeds of the THC-producing *Cannabis* plant. Many healthcare, prevention and public health professionals are shifting towards use of the term cannabis instead of marijuana. However, cannabis may not be well-understood by adolescents or parents/caregivers. Indeed, *there is no one term that is universally recognized or used by youth, young adults, or parents to refer to cannabis or THC-containing products.*

Limited research suggests that marijuana is a well-understood term among different age groups, even if it is not the term that people would use themselves. In your work with young people and families, adjust your language as needed to the terms that are best understood by the people you serve.

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Keys to a Conversation When Working with Teens

While there is no “script” for talking with your adolescent patient or client about cannabis, there are some guidelines to follow. Based on motivational interviewing literature, three useful general conversational tips are provided below. These tips can promote a productive discussion with an adolescent.

1. Getting the conversation started

Invite the teen to share about cannabis. This will help you better understand your client’s perspective about cannabis and will allow the teen to share their knowledge and thoughts in a non-judgmental, respectful way. Here are some examples:

What have you heard about cannabis? What do you know about it?

How does cannabis fit into your life, your friends' lives, others in your school, or your family?

What do you think about people your age using cannabis?

People often feel pressure to participate in things their friends are doing, even if they aren't sure they want to. How do you feel when other people are using cannabis? [If it hasn't happened] How do you think you might handle it?

2. Be a good reflective listener.

This means responding to the teen with a statement that reflects what the teen has said. Showing that you value and want to understand their perspective builds open communication and relationships with the teen. Reflective listening typically involves short statements paraphrasing or adding what is implied but not said.

Here are examples:

Cannabis is legal for adults and you do not see it as bad as alcohol.

Your friends use cannabis, and it's important for you to have friends.

Your parents use it, so it's hard to see how it could be bad.

3. Seek permission to offer your views and input and check-in about what they heard you say.

Here is an example of this point:

As your provider, I want you to know that I am concerned about how today's strong cannabis can be harmful to a teen. I have some information about cannabis use and how it can affect your brain and body. Would you mind if I shared some of my thoughts with you?

Here are some concerns I have about using cannabis as a teenager. After I read this list, please tell me your thoughts.

When a young person uses today's very strong cannabis, it can...

- 1. disrupt brain development*
- 2. harm ability to learn and do well in school*
- 3. eventually worsen problems with anxiety, depression, and sleep*
- 4. impair driving ability*
- 5. reduce ways to manage stress*
- 6. contribute to environmental problems*

In what ways is this information relevant to you? Is this information useful?

NOTE: See separate fact sheet for more information on harms of cannabis use.

4. Encourage the teen to make healthy choices.

Offer simple and realistic advice about cutting back or abstaining from cannabis use. Non-confrontational advice expressed with non-judgmental concern can optimize the motivation for an adolescent to change or rethink their use of cannabis. Examples include the following:

It's great that you are not using cannabis. I encourage you to stay the course. Cannabis can be damaging to your developing brain and body. What are the things you are going to do to keep free of cannabis use?

Have you considered cutting back your use of cannabis? Doing so could reduce your risk of possible harms, even if you don't stop completely. I'm concerned that you could be doing damage to your mental health with cannabis use. And as we have discussed, the stronger forms of cannabis now available can do real damage to your developing brain. What do you think of this? What changes might you be willing to make?

Your friends are important. How can you handle your choice, if you choose not to use with them?

5. Maintain an ongoing dialogue and keep the door open.

Keep your door open for the adolescent to talk more about cannabis and health issues. You want to encourage your client to feel free to ask for help. Examples can include the following:

We can talk more about this whenever you want. I'm not here to judge. I care about your health - I'm here to listen.

If you are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or in a situation where you're unsure, I'm here to listen and help.

Anytime you have questions about what you've heard about cannabis or other substances that you're not sure about, I'm happy to share what I know so you can choose for yourself.

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Using Open-Ended Questions to Explore and Engage

Below are some other open-ended questions that may be helpful in conversation with your teen patients or clients:



Open-ended questions to explore use and context:

- “Can you tell me a little about your experiences with cannabis?”
- “What are some of the reasons you choose to use cannabis?”
- “What do you like about using it, and what do you not like so much?”

Eliciting the teen’s own concerns or ambivalence:

- “What have you noticed about how cannabis affects your mood, energy, or schoolwork?”
- “What are some things that worry you (or others) about your cannabis use?”
- “If you were to make any changes in how much or how often you use, what might that look like?”

Exploring goals and values:

- “What are some things that are really important to you right now?”
- “How does cannabis fit into the kind of person you want to be or the goals you have?”

Building discrepancy and motivation for change:

- “On a scale from 0 to 10, how important is it to you to make a change in your cannabis use?”
- “What would need to happen for you to move up one point on that scale?”
- “What are some of the good things that might come out of cutting back or stopping?”

Eliciting confidence and supporting autonomy:

- “If you decided to make a change, what do you think would help you succeed?”
- “What strengths have you used in the past to handle tough situations?”
- “What would you like to happen next when it comes to your cannabis use?”

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Talking to Teens About Cannabis

It's important knowing what to say in response to specific statements that a teen you are working with might make about cannabis use. Use this guide when your teen patient or client raises these issues.

Remember: Approach these conversations with an open-minded, non-judgmental approach, using the tips in the previous section as a guide. The Ask-Offer-Ask framework provides a useful strategy for offering information in a way that promotes self-reflection and dialogue, rather than giving instruction or shutting down questions.

1. *Your teen client says nothing when asked about cannabis.*

Your response: “What do your friends say about marijuana?” “What would you do if you were offered a gummy? Or a vape with cannabis? “Would it be ok if we talk about some concerns I have about cannabis?”

2. *Teen says: “I know, I know. My parents have talked with me about this before.”*

Your response: “It's great you've had conversations about cannabis before. How did those conversations go?

I've learned some new things about cannabis that might help you make informed decisions about cannabis in the future. Can I share some of what I've learned with you?”

3. *The teen says: “I'm only doing it once in a while on weekends, so it's not a big deal.”*

Your response: “What do you like about using it, and what do you not like so much?” *(Continued on next page)*

I'm happy to hear that this is not something you do regularly. Using any substance can be harmful at your age because your brain and body are still developing, and substance use can interfere with that process. What are some concerns you have about using marijuana?"

4. *Your teen says: "I only did it once, and I'm totally fine."*

Your response: "And what was that like?" "What is your thought about not doing it again?"

5. *The teen says: "It's less harmful than alcohol."*

Your response: "It's great that you want to protect your health by using less harmful substances. Cannabis does have different effects and risks than alcohol, but both are not good for you. Cannabis can be used in a way that is more harmful than drinking alcohol. But why use either? I don't want to sound like the no-drug police. But all drugs are bad for your health – alcohol, marijuana, nicotine, opioids, even if they work in different ways. What are some things you worry about your cannabis use?"

"One thing that alcohol and marijuana have in common is that they can dull your feelings and experiences. Sometimes when people are feeling sad, worried, or stressed, they use substances to escape those feelings. What are some reasons that you use marijuana?"

6. *The teen says: "Marijuana is a natural plant."*

Your response: "The idea of something being natural can be appealing. What appeals to you about the idea that marijuana is natural?"

Can I share a concern I have about that? [Assuming yes] Even when a plant is grown naturally, it can still be unhealthy or harmful. There are many plants that have toxic effects if consumed in certain ways. Other types of substances that we know can be harmful, like tobacco and alcohol, come from natural plants. What are your thoughts about that?"

7. *The teen says: “It helps me with my anxiety.”*

Your response: “I understand. A lot of people experience anxiety or stress. Are there other reasons you are using marijuana?”

“There are reasons people use substances and there are reasons why it may not be a good idea. Can I share some information about marijuana and anxiety?” [Assuming they say yes], “Did you know that most teens who use for extended periods eventually have a worse problem with anxiety? It seems better to find healthy ways to cope with difficult feelings like anxiety. What do you think about trying other ways?”

8. *The teen says: “It’s medicine. I’m not using something harmful.”*

Your response: “What are you experiencing that you feel that marijuana is a useful medicine for? ... All medicines have side effects. Some side effects of marijuana are low motivation, increased anxiety, and not really caring about things as much as usual. Many medications can be also harmful when not used as prescribed, like opioids. What are your thoughts about exploring other ways to deal with that?”

Medical marijuana is legal in many places, but there’s not much evidence that shows it helps with most of the issues it is prescribed for. For adults, medical marijuana cards have no dose associated with them. Does that surprise you? What are your thoughts about that?”

Tip: Have conversations about cannabis and substance use with all teens, even those who are not engaging in substance use. For those who don’t use substances, explore and reinforce motivations for not using, provide information about questions or misconceptions they have, and help them develop strategies to decline use if offered

9. *The teen says: “But it’s legal. Why would they make something legal that could hurt me?”*

Your response: “Yes, it’s legal at age 21, like alcohol and tobacco. When you turn 21, it will be your choice to use these substances or not. It’s my role to give advice about your health and safety that you can use to make those choices. But it’s true, there are drugs that are legal that can be harmful to people, and particularly to teenagers.

Are you interested in discussing this more? Why would states make something legal that could be harmful?”

10. *The teen says: “It’s not addictive like hard drugs.”*

Your response: “So, you don’t want to put yourself at risk for addiction. I’m happy to hear that. What is important to you about that?”

“That’s a common view of cannabis. I’ve seen some research on cannabis and addiction. Can I share with you what I’ve learned? Just like other drugs, cannabis can be addictive – 1 in 3 people who use cannabis have cannabis use disorder. And young people are much more likely to become addicted compared to an adult user, because younger brains are changing in ways that make them more susceptible to addiction. What concerns do you have about what I’ve shared?”

11. *The teen says: “I vape it. This is better than smoking.”*

Your response: “I’m glad you are not smoking. You are looking for ways to keep yourself safer. Vaping still means you are using cannabis. Can I share some concerns about that I have? Many of the risks of cannabis come from its impacts on the brain, and that occurs no matter how you use cannabis. Vaping can also introduce chemicals into your lungs and the air that can be harmful. What are other ways you can keep yourself safe?”

12. Your teen says: “I don’t know what to say when other kids ask me to use.”

Your response: “Yes, that can be a big challenge. Let’s talk about ways you feel comfortable in such situations. It might help us to start with some brainstorming. What do you think are some good things to say?
(REINFORCE SUGGESTIONS FROM THE TEEN)

These are great. What do you think of these ideas?

- Nah, I’m not into that.
- You go ahead. I’m good not using today.
- Maybe later. Not now.
- I have a big game/event tomorrow and don’t want to be out of it.
- My parents are going to start drug testing me if I give them reasons to be suspicious.”

If you are interested in learning more about the strategies and ideas provided here, look for training and resources for evidence-based practices like motivational interviewing. For up-to-date information about substances and preventing substance misuse, the [PTTC Network](#) provides frequent training, resources and technical assistance.

Parent and Caregivers: Guide to Preventing Cannabis Use

Parents and caregivers have a big impact on whether teens use drugs. You act as a protective barrier between your teen and the many things that might encourage substance use. Research shows this is true. It's not always easy to control who your teen hangs out with or what music they like, but your values and opinions about substance use make a big difference. These are some key things experts say can help you play an important role in preventing cannabis use at home.

1. Be Informed

- Stay up to date on the facts about cannabis. Learn why some teens use it and how high-potency cannabis can be especially harmful.
- Be honest and caring when you explain that you don't want your teen to get into a habit that could hurt their health or future.
- Share your personal concerns when it feels right to do so.
- Use the “**Cannabis Fact Sheet**” to help share accurate information and answer your teen's questions.

2. Talk Early and Often

- Start the conversation before your teen is ever offered cannabis.
 - Experts say it's best to begin talking about substance use even before middle school.
- Keep the conversation going throughout the teen years.
- With high school teens, focus on how to handle peer pressure and what to do if friends are using cannabis.
- Talk clearly about your rules and expectations.

- Keep checking in, even if your older teen seems less interested in talking or listening.

3. Conversation Tips

- Be a good listener.
- Ask open-ended questions like, “What have you learned about the risks of using cannabis?”
- Use everyday moments to start conversations—like news stories, school events, social media posts, or things you notice in public.
- Short, casual talks often work better than one long, serious discussion.
- Avoid sounding like you’re lecturing or trying to control everything—stay calm and understanding.
- Admit that trying cannabis might seem tempting to some teens, but make sure to explain that it comes with real risks.
- *(If relevant)* Be honest if you used substances when you were younger, and explain why you wish you hadn’t.
- *(If relevant)* If your family has a history of addiction, let your teen know that this can increase their risk for substance problems, including cannabis use.

4. Be a Prevention Role Model at Home

What you do at home matters just as much as what you say. Good parenting habits can help protect your teen’s health and choices.

- Be a positive role model. Don’t make drug or alcohol use seem cool or glamorous. If you use legal substances, do so responsibly.
- Support your teen’s healthy interests—like sports, music, or other hobbies.
- Encourage friendships with peers who don’t use drugs.
- Celebrate school success and help your teen stay focused on education.

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- Spend time together as a family—like sharing regular meals or doing fun activities.
 - Help your teen build strong relationships with other trusted adults, such as relatives, teachers, or coaches.
 - Have substance-free family activities. This shows that adults can have fun and relax without alcohol or drugs.

5. Signs your teen may have a problem

It can be hard to know the difference between normal teen behaviors and behavior that may be related to cannabis use. Even professionals may struggle to identify these behaviors. Below are signs that may indicate your teen is using cannabis and is developing a problem. But be aware that there are no guaranteed “red flag” signs that your teen may be using cannabis. Sometimes the behaviors you are seeing are part of normal adolescence!

- **Changes in behavior or uncharacteristic behaviors** (e.g., slurred, slow, or repetitive speech; lethargic movement; inappropriate laughter; abrupt changes in social life, including new peers or withdrawing from peer groups)
- **Changes in or uncharacteristic health behaviors** (e.g., excessive sleeping; “cotton mouth;” dry, bloodshot eyes; excessive eating or snacking)
- **Changes in or uncharacteristic moods or attitudes** (e.g., too relaxed or reserved; paranoia over small inconveniences; confusion or disorientation; increased resistance to parental rules/expectations)
- **Home-related** (e.g., spends excessive time in the shower or outdoors to hide smell of cannabis; smell of cannabis in the car; drug paraphernalia; disappearance of money or other things of value)
- **School-related** (e.g., diminished school achievement; decreased attendance; disregard for rules at school)

6. A note to consider if you legally use cannabis for medical or non-medical reasons

If you consume cannabis legally for medical or recreational use, keep the following considerations in mind:

- Not supplying cannabis to your teen
- Avoid using when your teen is present
- Store products in a secure place, including medicinal cannabis
- Avoid glamorizing cannabis
- Express disapproval of underage use
- Understand that your teen is likely aware of when you are inebriated; it changes our behavior and interactions more than we realize.

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Fact Sheet & Resources

Talking to Teens About Cannabis: What Parents Need to Know

Cannabis (also called marijuana) use among teens is common, and it can have serious effects on health, safety, and brain development. Parents and caregivers play a key role in helping teens make safe, healthy choices. Here's a guide with clear, research-based information you can use when talking about cannabis with your teen.

1. What Cannabis Is

- Cannabis comes from the dried leaves, stems, flowers, or seeds of the cannabis plant (2).
- THC is the chemical in cannabis that causes the “high” and can be addictive (2).
- Teens may use cannabis by smoking, vaping, or eating THC-containing products (2).
- Cannabis is widely used by adolescents. Nearly 1 in 3 12th graders report using it in the past year, and about 1 in 8 use it daily (15, 16).

Tip: Knowing the forms of cannabis your teen might encounter helps you start meaningful conversations.

2. Behavioral Risks

- THC affects brain development, which can harm memory, attention, and decision-making—all skills needed for school and learning (17).
- Cannabis can be addictive (18). About one-third of teens who use it may develop a Cannabis Use Disorder, showing signs like:
 - Continued use despite problems
 - Strong urges to use
 - Difficulty cutting back
 - Needing more to get the same effect

3. Mental Health Risks

- Teens who use cannabis are 2-4 times more likely to experience major depression or think about suicide (19).
- Teens using high-potency cannabis may be 5-6 times more likely to develop psychosis (20).
- High-strength THC can also increase anxiety, depression, paranoia, or hallucinations (21, 22).

4. Safety and Health Risks

- THC can seriously impair driving skills and judgment. States where cannabis is legal are seeing more fatal crashes involving THC-impaired drivers, especially teens and young adults (23).
- Cannabis edibles can be dangerous for children and teens. Poison control centers report an increase in accidental and intentional ingestion among children and teens, leading to vomiting, confusion, drowsiness, and in severe cases, seizures or coma (24, 25).

Tip: Keep edibles and other cannabis products out of reach of children and teens by securing safely in a locked box.

5. Environmental Concerns

- Cannabis plants need about 6 gallons of water per day during the growing season, which can stress water resources in dry regions (26).
- Water runoff from cannabis farms may carry chemicals, pesticides, or other pollutants, affecting waterways and wildlife (26).
- Pesticide use in cannabis growing is not well regulated, creating risks for both the environment and consumers (26, 27).
- Disposable vaping devices contribute to electronic and plastic waste. Americans discarded an estimated 500,000 vapes per day in 2023, posing additional environmental and health risks (28).

Tip: Talking about environmental or concerns about cannabis not related to health can be a good way to start a conversation about cannabis with a teen in a way that feels non-judgmental.

Online Resources for Parents and Caregivers

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