



# Cannabis Talk Kit:

A Guide on What Cannabis is,  
and How to Navigate a  
Conversation with Your Teen  
About Cannabis



**Staten Island Partnership  
for Community Wellness**

# Frequently Asked Questions

## **Isn't cannabis safer for teens than alcohol and**

**tobacco?** Cannabis, alcohol and tobacco are all potentially harmful drugs. Each affects teens differently. Teen cannabis use is associated with many health and safety problems listed earlier in this pamphlet.

## **Isn't cannabis natural and therefore OK for teens to**

**use?** There are many natural things that are not good for our bodies. Regardless of it being “natural” or not cannabis can harm youth health.

## **Isn't it better for my child to consume cannabis at home**

**where I can make sure they stay safe?** Research shows that teens who use alcohol at home are actually more likely to abuse alcohol when not at home. The same holds true for cannabis.

## **What about pot brownies and cookies? Aren't they safer than smoking cannabis?**

Cannabis, no matter how it is used, is harmful to teen health. Some cannabis products that are eaten or vaporized are more potent than smoked cannabis. The health effects of teen cannabis use listed earlier in this pamphlet are the same whether cannabis is smoked, vaporized, or swallowed.

## **I smoked when I was a kid, why deny a rite of passage?**

Keep in mind that most teens do not use marijuana, so it is not really a rite of passage. Today's marijuana is more potent than the marijuana that was available in the past. In addition, some marijuana products being sold are “concentrates” and are even more potent.

## **How do I tell my child not to smoke if I do now or did**

**when I was younger?** Just like with alcohol, tell your child that it is against the law to use cannabis until they are 21. The teen brain can be harmed by regular marijuana use in ways that the adult brain is not. Using cannabis as a teen increases the likelihood that a person will become addicted to marijuana.

# The Facts

*What do I need to know now about cannabis?*

## What is cannabis?

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Cannabis, also known as marijuana, one of the most used drugs in the U.S., is a product of the plant, *Cannabis sativa*. The main active chemical in marijuana, also present in other forms of cannabis, is THC. Of the roughly 400 chemicals found in the cannabis plant, THC affects the brain the most. It is a mindaltering chemical that gives cannabis users a high.

## What does it look like?

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Cannabis itself is a green or gray mixture of dried, shredded flowers and leaves of the plant.

## What are some terms for cannabis?

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Bud, blunt, chronic, dab, dope, ganja, grass, green, hash, herb, joint, loud, mary jane, mj, pot, reefer, sinsemilla, skunk, smoke, trees, wax, marijuana

## How is it used?

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Many roll loose marijuana into a cigarette (called a “joint”) or smoke it in a pipe or water pipe (called a “bong”) or in a cigar (called a “blunt”). A single intake of smoke is called a “hit.”

Cannabis can also be mixed into food or brewed as tea and ingested.

In states where cannabis has become legalized, more and more marijuana “edibles” are seen in retail establishments where cannabis is sold, including baked goods and candy that closely or even exactly resemble well-known foods (example: brownies, chocolate, cookies, pizza or gummy bears).

Cannabis can also be vaporized. In addition, there are marijuana concentrates such as hash, wax, tinctures and oil.

## 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.

### What are the short-term effects of cannabis use?

Short-term effects of cannabis include problems with memory and learning, distorted perception (sights, sounds, time, touch), trouble with thinking and problem-solving, loss of motor skills, coordination, increased heart rate, and anxiety. These effects are even greater when other substances are taken with the cannabis.

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

Teenagers experience intense feelings due to hormone changes, which is a normal part of development. While most adults have a variety of healthy activities and behaviors that they turn to in order to relieve stress, it can be different for teens. If a teen is using cannabis as a coping method for anxiety, depression or stress, they are more likely to continue this behavior, because it works (and it works immediately). They gain instant relief and gratification. They may think, "When I feel stressed out, I smoke pot and it relaxes me."

Instead of taking time to process and deal with the feeling, they alter it by getting high, which in turn stunts the emotional coping process. The teen's stress tolerance is lowered, because they have not experienced the natural passing of the feeling, and they haven't found and used a healthy behavior — like sports, hanging out with a friend, playing music, talking to someone about how they feel or reading a book — to aid in coping with the pressure and stress they feel. This is why regular pot users who start as teens and stop when they are adults may have a difficult time working through emotions. They are essentially learning healthy behaviors and coping skills that they should have acquired years ago. Cannabis is unlikely to result in permanent disability or death, but too much of the drug in a person's system can have harmful effects, and isn't as benign as some teens want you to believe.

Cannabis can increase risk of chronic cough, bronchitis and

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### *What should I look for in my home?*



In addition to cannabis or other illicit substances, keep your eyes peeled for rolling papers, cigars, and pipes of any kind, as well as small plastic bags, containers, and lighters. As well as soda cans with holes in the sides and burn marks made around the make shift holes.

schizophrenia in vulnerable individuals. It also may increase risk of anxiety, depression and a series of attitude and personality changes. These changes can also include poor performance in school, eating and sleeping problems.

Cannabis, just like any other substance, can lead to addiction. It affects the brain's reward system in the same way as all other substances — and the likelihood of addiction increases considerably for those who start young.

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

Teens will be teens. They sleep late, their groups of friends change, they can be moody and they may have on-again, off-again trouble in school. So how do you know when your teen is using cannabis or other substances? Here are some signs to watch for:

- Declining school work and or grades; difficulty motivating
- Abrupt changes in friends friend group
- Abnormal health issues or sleep issues
- Deteriorating relationships with family
- Less openness and honesty

What it comes down to is that **you know your teen best**. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

### Signs to watch for



Declining school work and grades



Abrupt changes in friends



Abnormal health issues or sleep issues



Deteriorating relationships with family



Less openness and honesty

# Start Here

## How do I talk with my teen about cannabis?

Talking to teens is difficult to begin with. Talking to them about substances and alcohol is even harder. As a parent, you are often met with resistance. The good news is there are ways to engage your teen that promote open and positive communication.

### Get in the right frame of mind

Here are some effective tools to set the stage for a conversation about substances:

- **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 attacked, they are less likely to be receptive to your message. We suggest that, in order to achieve the best outcome for you and your teen, 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 helpful to think about how you felt when you were a teenager.
- **Be clear about your goals.** It may help to write them down. Once you know what you would like to get from the conversation, you can look back at these afterward and review what went right, what went wrong, what goals were met, which ones were saved for a later date and were able to deliver them effectively.
- **Be calm and relaxed.** If you approach your teen with anger or panic, it will make it harder to achieve your goals. If when speaking about a difficult subject you are anxious about having a conversation with them, find some things to do that will help relax you (take a walk, call a friend, meditate).

### Sample goals



Begin an ongoing conversation about my teen's use



Gain insight into the pressures they may be facing with substances



Express concern and support



Gauge how they feels about cannabis in general

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- **Be positive.** If you approach the situation with shame, anger, scare tactics, disappointment, your efforts will be counter-productive. Instead, be attentive, curious, respectful and understanding.
- **Don't lecture.** Keep in mind that if you spoke with them about drugs when they were younger, they already know that you disapprove of their use. To lecture them about this will most likely lead to them shutting down, tuning you out, anger or worse — it could be misinterpreted as you disapproving of them instead of their actions, which can lead to shame and, in turn, more substance use.

Throwing your weight around in order to stop something from happening (“*You can’t, because I’m your parent and I said so*”) is highly ineffective. Avoid pulling rank if you get frustrated.

- **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 their anxiety and maybe even your own. Perhaps this means taking a walk with their or and sitting in the yard of 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 they are 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.

## Try active listening

Active listening is a skill that takes practice and is highly effective. 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:** “What are your thoughts about marijuana.”



### 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 them.

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 them about their concerns, and whether it’s okay that you offer some feedback.

**Try:** “Is now a good time to talk or would you prefer to wait until after dinner?”



### 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?”

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>WANT</b> I <b>want</b> you to stop smoking pot, and I'm here to help you.</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 in uence.</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. 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.