

EDUCATOR PRIMER ON MENTAL HEALTH, UNDERAGE DRINKING, AND UNDERAGE MARIJUANA USE

Mental Health

LESSON 9

Introduction

Educators and counselors play a vital role in supporting kids as they learn to make decisions, especially when it comes to high-risk decisions like underage drinking and underage marijuana use that can negatively affect them in the short- and long-term. *Ask, Listen, Learn's* “How Alcohol Affects the Brain” videos and classroom lessons teach kids about the impact these substances have on the developing brain and body. Armed with this knowledge, they are better equipped to say “YES” to a healthy lifestyle and “NO” to underage drinking and underage marijuana use.

Building upon this content, the newest addition to the program includes a unit on mental health and the negative impact that underage drinking and underage marijuana use have on it. According to Responsibility.org’s 2025 Parents and Kids Survey, mental health and stress are concerns for kids. 44% of kids were worried about their mental health and 59% of kids were worried about stress and/or anxiety. Other research showed that 1 in 6 U.S. youth ages 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year¹. Because mental health challenges and substance use disorders can often go hand-in-hand, the need for providing kids with healthy tools to manage their mental health is clear.

This new *Ask, Listen, Learn* lesson continues to approach prevention from a science-based perspective with a focus on what the developing brain does, how alcohol and marijuana affect kids, and how that can negatively impact their mental health. The new lesson and video also encourage students to adopt healthy, evidence-based strategies for coping with stress and avoiding unhealthy strategies like underage drinking and underage marijuana use.

Before you implement this unit, it is recommended that you inform school counselors, social workers, and administrators, in case parents or students have additional questions. It may also be helpful to review the information in this guide on the following topics:

- **Adolescent Mental Health and the Brain**
- **Alcohol, Marijuana, and Mental Health**
- **Resources for Continuing the Discussion**



For more resources on the negative impacts of underage drinking and underage marijuana use, go to AskListenLearn.org.

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Adolescent Mental Health and the Brain

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), mental health affects how we think, feel, and act, and helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices². Because mental health involves many different components, various parts of the brain work together to play crucial roles that impact different elements of mental health. This is done, in part, by the prefrontal cortex, the decision-making part of the brain, and the limbic system, which helps regulate emotions through the interaction of different parts of the brain including:

- the hypothalamus, which controls responses to stress,
- the hippocampus, which manages memories related to emotions, and
- the amygdala, which prepares the body for “flight or fight” responses during times of stress or worry.

During adolescence, important changes occur in the brain as it matures, involving areas of the brain focused on social experiences and relationships as well as the continued development of the prefrontal cortex. Because of this ongoing development, adolescent brains respond to stress differently than adult brains which can increase the risks of developing stress-related mental illnesses like depression and anxiety³. Mental health problems experienced during childhood and adolescence have been found to be a risk factor for impaired mental health and poorer quality of life as they develop into adults⁴. Research also suggests that there is a correlation between mental health issues and substance use wherein mental health issues can lead to substance misuse and substance misuse can exacerbate mental health problems in young adulthood⁵. Because the adolescent years are critical during development, empowering kids early with the tools

to manage mental health issues like stress is paramount. Providing your students with healthy ways to cope with stress can help them say “NO” to unhealthy coping strategies like underage drinking and underage marijuana use.

Alcohol, Marijuana, and Mental Health

Since alcohol is a central nervous system depressant, consuming alcohol slows down the brain’s ability to send messages throughout the body and negatively affects the delicate balance needed to function. Because of this impact on the brain and body, alcohol should not be consumed by teens (the legal drinking age is 21) and some adults should not drink at all.

When consumed in moderation, alcohol can provide short-term feelings of relaxation and is sometimes consumed as a way to calm down or relieve stress and anxiety. However, research shows that, once the effects of alcohol wear off, anxiety often increases again leading people to consume larger quantities to feel the desired effect and raising the risk of alcohol dependence.

Marijuana, also referred to as cannabis, is a plant containing the chemical compound tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). When consumed, THC interferes with the endocannabinoid system, the system that helps regulate body and brain functions such as helping with memory, coping with stress, pain, and anxiety, and keeping hunger, alertness, and motor coordination in balance. When THC enters the body, it overwhelms the endocannabinoid system, interfering with these functions. Additionally, some people may experience fear, anxiety, and paranoia. Adolescent marijuana use is also associated with an increased risk for psychosis later in life⁶.

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Adolescent Mental Health and the Brain

With their still-developing brains, the impacts of alcohol and marijuana on kids are more significant than on adults. Among other things, underage drinking and underage marijuana use can impact kids' mental health by interfering with much-needed sleep and impairing good decision-making leading to other harmful behaviors. Studies have shown that drinking alcohol and using marijuana in adolescence may significantly impact brain functions affecting cognition, memory, and school performance over time causing additional challenges and stressors^{7,8}.

For those adolescents with existing mental health issues, there are additional concerns when it comes to substance use disorders, such as alcohol use disorder and cannabis use disorder. Studies suggest that there is a relationship between mental health issues and substance use disorders in adolescence⁹ and when occurring together, substance use disorders and psychiatric disorders exacerbate one another, leading to severer symptoms and worse outcomes including higher risk of suicide⁵.

Why This Matters Now

According to research, using alcohol and other drugs early in life is the greatest risk factor for developing a substance use disorder later¹⁰. The *Ask, Listen, Learn* mental health content is designed to provide healthy coping strategies as an alternative to alcohol or marijuana while also helping delay the onset of underage drinking and underage marijuana use. By informing kids of the effects of these substances on their developing brains and mental health, it reinforces the fact that underage drinking and underage marijuana use is not only illegal but also dangerous.

Resources for Continuing the Discussion

This lesson is a starting point for kids, educators, and parents to engage in conversations about mental health, coping with stress, and the dangers of underage drinking and underage marijuana use. The mental health content in this curriculum is not intended to be comprehensive of all the knowledge and skills students need to maintain good mental health. We encourage you to continue the conversation with your students and explore these other free resources. If there are significant signs of mental health distress or other health and safety concerns, please consult with parents, your school's counseling and social work team, and/or a medical professional.

Additional Curricular and Educator Resources

- [Erika's Lighthouse](#)- Mental health, depression and suicide awareness educational resources for the classroom and families.
- [Jane the Brain Video Series](#)- A video series from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) that helps kids understand big feelings like stress, frustration, and sadness.
- [SAMHSA for Educators](#)- Helpful resources for educators including warning signs and ways to support student mental health.

Parents and families are great partners when it comes to mental health education and underage drinking and underage marijuana use prevention. We recommend connecting parents and families with information to help them continue these important conversations at home. On the next page are resources that can be shared with families relating to the content in this lesson.

For more resources on the negative impacts of underage drinking and underage marijuana use, go to [AskListenLearn.org](https://www.AskListenLearn.org).

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Parents and Caregivers Resources

- [Letter to families](#)- Language that can be sent home to families informing them of the content that will be taught in their students' lesson.
- [SAMHSA: For Parents and Caregivers of Children](#)- Helpful resources for parents and caregivers of children including warning signs and tips for talking to children about mental health.
- [Child Mind Institute](#)- Articles and information about general topics relating to youth mental health.
- [Is Your Child at Risk?](#) - Risk assessment to help parents better understand their child's risks related to substance misuse.

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