

DEAR PARENTS,

As a school counselor and health and wellness teacher in a K-8 school, I often field questions about the appropriateness of teaching preteens about cannabis. I understand parents' instinct to delay the discussion until their child is older, but that's not protective. It's a missed opportunity, and it may even backfire.

If that seems counterintuitive, consider the developmental phase. Young adolescents are years away from having a fully formed prefrontal cortex and as a result they're more likely to take unhealthy risks--and less likely to predict the consequences of their actions. They need their parents and teachers to arm them with good information, help them identify safe risks, and preview pressure-filled or tempting scenarios.

Tweens are getting bombarded daily with data -- both accurate and inaccurate -- from friends, the 24-7 news cycle and social media. That means they're also getting subjected to a lot of bad information. Tweens hate to be manipulated, and adults can use that to their advantage by pointing out when others try to mislead them into believing that cannabis can't harm their still-developing brain.

Cannabis *can* harm kids, but scare tactics are ineffective. The best way to reach a young adolescent is to honor their intellect, treat them as the expert in their own life, avoid lecturing, focus on developing their critical-thinking skills, and give them age-appropriate, factual information.

The *Ask, Listen, Learn* unit on cannabis is designed to do just that. It covers everything from the risks associated with youth use, to how cannabis affects a tween's developing brain, body and behavior, to the basics of the endocannabinoid system. It gives kids the tools they need to draw their own conclusions and make smart, healthy decisions both now and down the road. That's a real gift.

The data underscores the need to tackle the topic directly with tweens. According to the Food and Drug Administration, e-cigarette use by middle schoolers spiked 48% from 2017 to 2018. *The New England Journal of Medicine* recently reported that 9% of eighth graders used e-cigarettes in the past 30 days -- more than double what it was just two years ago. This is significant because researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Southern California reported in the journal Pediatrics that 14-year-olds who tried e-cigarettes were three times more likely to try marijuana than students who hadn't tried them.

Prevention takes a village. *Ask, Listen, Learn*'s lesson is interactive and comprehensive, but kids need their parents to talk to them about substance use as well. At home, approach your child from a stance of calm curiosity. You can ask, "What have you heard about cannabis?" or "Do you think you know more or less than what I think you know?" or "Do you think most kids think it's dangerous to use marijuana?" Practice your poker face and stay nonreactive if they say something shocking. You want to make it safe for them to be honest and open.

I recognize that this entire topic may feel overwhelming--much like raising a tween!--but half the battle is being willing to have the conversation. The *Ask, Listen, Learn* lesson can provide your child with solid, developmentally appropriate information, but they still need you to impart your values, beliefs and expectations.



Sincerely,

Phyllis L. Fagell, LCPC
School Counselor
Author of "Middle School Matters"

