

How to Talk with Youth About Cannabis

A TRUSTED ADULT'S GUIDE TO CANNABIS CONVERSATIONS (AGES 4 TO 18)

Talking about substance use is rarely easy, but opening the door early can make a real difference. First, knowing the facts about cannabis* can help you explain what it is, how it's used, its side effects, and how it can affect young people's health.

Recent Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) findings show that a small number of children reported first using cannabis at age 8. Early use is less common, but it shows that kids may encounter substances and related messages earlier than many adults expect. This makes it important to start age-appropriate conversations about poison prevention and substance use sooner as well.

Now is a good time to pay attention to the messages the children in your life may be receiving about cannabis. Even though most young people don't face peer pressure to try cannabis until ages 15-19, they absorb information and observe adult behavior long before that. What you model as a trusted adult, and how you talk about cannabis when they're young, can prepare them to make responsible choices later.

A child's understanding of substance use will change as they grow. Use this guidance to help you have age-appropriate conversations at every stage.

**Cannabis is also called pot, weed, or marijuana*

Conversation starters and tips

The guidance below outlines age-appropriate ways to talk with youth about cannabis, including poison prevention. These age ranges are flexible, and it can be helpful to revisit topics from earlier stages with older youth. For example, a 15 year old may still benefit from conversations recommended for younger ages. The key is to avoid introducing complex topics before children are developmentally ready.

Ages 4 to 8: Focus on simple safety rules. Explain that they should not eat candy, gummies, or medicine if they don't know what it is, and that they should tell an adult right away when this happens. Emphasize that they will not get in trouble for telling an adult, speaking up helps keep them safe. You can connect this to everyday conversations about how different foods and drinks affect our bodies. Ask questions like, "How do certain foods make you feel?" or "How do we make healthy choices at home or at school?" Share examples, such as saving dessert until after dinner, eating candy in moderation, or trying to include a fruit or vegetable with each meal. It's important to keep any products that look like candy, snacks, or treats stored safely and out of children's reach. Avoid leaving them in places where kids might mistake them for food, such as the refrigerator, pantry, or cupboards. Store them in child-resistant containers and in locations that are locked or out of sight.

Ages 9 to 12: Begin explaining how cannabis can affect the brain and body. Help them understand that using cannabis can get in the way of things they care about, like school or sports. Talk about what to do if they see cannabis products at a friend’s home and identify trusted adults they can go to if they feel unsafe or have questions. Ask open ended questions to gauge what they already know: “What have you heard about cannabis?” “Where do you see it?” “Why do you think cannabis isn’t appropriate for kids?” Their answers can help you understand what they know and where they may need more guidance.

Ages 13 to 15: Talk about peer pressure, what they may see at parties or on social media, and the difference between myths and facts about cannabis. Discuss ways to say no if they’re offered cannabis. Ask questions that help them reflect on their relationships and boundaries: “How are things going with your friends?” “Do you ever feel pressured to do something you don’t want to do?” “How would you respond if someone asked you to try cannabis?”

Ages 15 to 18: Reinforce the facts and talk about driving impairment, legal consequences, and how to advocate for themselves in sticky situations. Remind them that choosing not to use cannabis is a personal decision and they never need to justify it, good friends will understand their decisions. You can offer language they might use, such as prioritizing their mental health, not wanting to risk their goals in school or sports, or not wanting to feel targeted by industry marketing. You can also talk about coping strategies: “When you’re upset, what helps you feel better?” Continue to acknowledge positive choices and communication, such as, “I appreciate you sharing your concerns about the party,” or “Thanks for letting me know you arrived at your friend’s house safely.”

If someone, especially a child, has consumed or been exposed to cannabis, call the free Poison Control Center hotline at 1-800-222-1222. For immediate medical attention, call 911.

Resources

- [Be Cannabis Aware \(https://becannabisaware.org/\)](https://becannabisaware.org/)
- [Talking to Kids About Marijuana | Children's Hospital Colorado \(https://www.childrenscolorado.org/just-ask-childrens/articles/talking-to-kids-about-marijuana/#:~:text=Listen%20openly%20to%20your%20child,openly%20with%20them%20about%20it\)](https://www.childrenscolorado.org/just-ask-childrens/articles/talking-to-kids-about-marijuana/#:~:text=Listen%20openly%20to%20your%20child,openly%20with%20them%20about%20it)
- [PARENT: Parenting Mercer Island \(https://parentingmercerisland.org/\)](https://parentingmercerisland.org/)

Minnesota Department of Health
Substance Misuse Prevention Section
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<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/cannabis/materials.html>

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