

Protecting young minds when marijuana is legal

Stan Mantooth and Dr. Robert Levin, Special to Ventura County Star Published 9:00 a.m. PT Dec. 16, 2017

On Jan. 1, marijuana — a substance that affects youth differently than adults — will become legal for retail sale in California. Although the federal government still classifies cannabis as illegal, California voters have elected to legalize it for adults age 21 and older.

We write not to debate legalization, or to comment on cannabis use by adults, but to inform you about the way cannabis affects the minds of young people. The science is simple: Cannabis use during adolescence can negatively impact the still-developing teenage brain. It can also lead to addiction.

Recent research published in the New England Journal of Medicine has shown that using cannabis during the adolescent years can negatively — and sometimes permanently — affect the developing adolescent brain. While our state laws are changing, school policies remain the same: All public schools (including charters) that receive federal funding cannot permit the possession or use of cannabis in any form on school property by students, staff or visitors.

This policy remains in alignment with those that already address the use of alcohol, tobacco and vaping devices. While these products are also legal for adults 21 and over, they are never allowed on any school campus.

If a student is found on school property with any of these items, he or she will be offered resources to give them an opportunity to discontinue their substance use, but in many cases, the student could also face suspension or expulsion. This also applies to all forms of cannabis, such as common dried marijuana leaves and more contemporary products like highly concentrated cannabis oils and edible items.

If you are not yet aware of how, why or to what extent these forms of cannabis adversely affect teenagers, consider reviewing the health and awareness-focused resources at How High Ventura County (howhighventuracounty.org), MJ Fact Check (mjfactcheck.org) or the National Institute on Drug Abuse (drugabuse.gov).

There are many positive benefits to maintaining a proactive dialogue with your teen about the potential harm of cannabis. Children whose parents disapprove of cannabis use are less likely to use it. In a survey of current use of cannabis by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, youth who perceived strong parental disapproval of cannabis used it strikingly less often than those who did not perceive disapproval (a 4.8 percent use rate vs. 31.3 percent).

Cannabis is the No. 1 reason youth enter drug treatment programs in Ventura County. According to local drug treatment admission data, 88 percent of participating youth cited cannabis as their drug of choice. If you are concerned about someone's cannabis use, you can contact your school counselor for resources, or find treatment providers by contacting 2-1-1 Ventura County (dial 211 or 800-339-9597, or visit 211ventura.org).

As adults and members of our communities, we must remember that part of our responsibility to youth is positive role modeling of the behaviors we expect of them. Just as with adult use of tobacco and alcohol, excessive or harmful use of cannabis, including decisions involving driving under the influence, will be observed by young people and perceived as "acceptable behaviors." As a community, we must prioritize the health and safety of our young people and clearly communicate the risks of cannabis use, just as we do with tobacco and alcohol.

We seek your support and assistance in helping to protect the well-being of our children as we navigate into a new future and face ever-evolving challenges in our community.

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Source: Ventura County Star, December 2017