

Cannabis and Kids

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Cannabis and young people: what practitioners can do

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It is pretty conclusive from the evidence, that the majority people who use cannabis, including young people will not come to any great harm. But this view tends to obscure the evidence from youth workers and others that an unknown number of young people do have problems with cannabis. And if both practitioners and the wider community of young people are in denial of this possibility, then it places some young people who are experiencing cannabis-related problems in a difficult situation. Young people with cannabis-related problems need reassurance that some people actually do have difficulties with the drug.

So what can practitioners do?

Provide information

Knowledge does not necessarily result in behaviour change. However, information is an essential prerequisite of most interventions whether they are aiming to prevent use, improve knowledge or reduce harm. Practitioners need to communicate accurate information about cannabis in a credible and non-didactic way.

Help young people to assess their use

Often drug interventions are based on the premise that if we inform young people about the risks, they'll think again about their use and stop or at least slow-down. With cannabis we've tended to emphasise respiratory risk, and more recently mental health problems. But starting a discussion with a young person with these issues may be counter-productive. Because of the polarized debate about cannabis, presenting young people with these risks is tantamount to saying 'just say no' to them.

In many cases young people are concerned about their cannabis consumption, not because of some distant and hypothetical health risk but because too much time, energy and money is being spent on weed. Most of the day revolves around the drug; and those close to the user complain about them being stoned all the time.

Asking open questions to young people about the positive and negative experiences and views of using cannabis is more likely to result in an open dialogue about cannabis. Questions could focus on why they

take drugs; what concerns they have; and what they want to do about their drug use. A useful technique might include listing a number of possible responses – both positive and negative – to the above questions. Young people can then be invited to indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the response. In this way young people may feel that they have more control over the discussion.

HIT has developed a 16-question self-assessment quiz intended to help people consider the impact cannabis may be having on them. Depending upon an individual's score, recommendations are made about their cannabis use. See www.knowcannabis.org.uk.

Help young people to cut down or stop

A number of countries including Australia and The Netherlands have recently developed and implemented interventions designed to enable heavy, frequent users to reduce or stop their cannabis use. These interventions use cognitive behavioural approaches. They include enabling the cannabis user to assess the benefits and costs of cannabis; decide whether to cut-down or stop; plan and prepare for change; set realistic targets; identify high-risk situations; deal with withdrawal; and prevent relapse prevention. HIT produce a modified tried-and-tested Australian publication called, *What's the Deal on Quitting? A Do-It Yourself Guide*. An online self-help programme is also available at www.knowcannabis.org.uk. Practitioner's shouldn't be put off discussing these issues with young people. Anyone who has participated in a NHS smoking cessation programme will be familiar with the approach. Practitioners can also provide some 'top-tips' to young people who trying to cut-down or stop:

- If you use cannabis everyday, you should try to skip a couple of days each week
- Buy less and use less – maybe make a one-skinner instead
- Smoke fewer spliffs a day
- Avoid using stronger types of cannabis
- Avoid situations, places and people that you associate with cannabis
- Think about how you'll cope with an offer of cannabis.

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factsheet