



# CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

## Teach your kids about the dangers of marijuana

By Jane Sutter

For many years, parents have had the dilemma of teaching their children about the dangers of alcohol while perhaps drinking alcohol themselves and acknowledging that it's a legal substance for those 21 and over.

Teaching kids about the dangers of marijuana smoking was different, given that recreational usage has been illegal in New York State. That may be changing in 2021. Gov. Andrew Cuomo, in his State of the State address in January, reiterated his support for the legalization of marijuana for recreational use by adults 21 and over.

If that happens, New York State will join 15 other states and the District of Columbia where possession of marijuana for recreational usage is legal, according to statistics compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The legalization of marijuana goes against Catholic teaching. The church teaches that "the use of drugs inflicts very grave damage on human health and life. Their use, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense." (No. 2291 in the Catechism) At a drug enforcement conference in Rome in 2014, Pope Francis also spoke out against the legalization of drugs for recreational use.

Parents and teachers need to be aware that many pediatricians are concerned that laws legalizing marijuana for recreational use, although not targeting adolescents, create an environment in which teens may think there's



no danger for them in using marijuana, according to the American Academy of Pediatricians.

More teens for whatever reason seem to be finding marijuana usage to be acceptable. A survey conducted by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health in 2017 showed a decline in teens believing that there was "great risk" in smoking marijuana once a month or one to two times per week.

However, usage of marijuana by teens hasn't changed in recent years. According to a 2020 study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 35 percent of 12th-graders had used marijuana in the past year; 28 percent of 10th-graders had done so, and 11 percent of eighth-graders had

done so. Those percentages have held steady for the past 10 years.

There's no one reason that adolescents use marijuana, according to prevention education manager for Delphi Rise, a behavioral health agency. Dougherty-Herman teaches drug education programs in schools in Monroe and Wayne counties; she also works with counselors and educators in those schools.

Young people may try marijuana out of curiosity and/or because they have friends using it, Dougherty-Herman said. They may be looking for a way to relieve stress, or they've heard music lyrics or seen videos that glamorize drug use. There's no one type of teen who uses marijuana, Dougherty-Herman said. Some athletes and studious kids use it.

Kristie Elias, vice president of behavioral health at Catholic Family Center, says teens most often start using marijuana as a way to fit in with their peers. "And then as they start to fit in, they find that it makes them feel better when they're interacting with groups or when they're studying in their rooms feeling really anxious about learning the material. They like to use it when they're hanging out with their buddies because then everyone is funnier, right?"

Elias oversees drug prevention programs for

### How marijuana use affects health and well-being:

- **School:** Marijuana users often have a hard time thinking clearly, concentrating, remembering things and solving problems. Frequent marijuana use often causes grades to drop. Regular or heavy users often lose interest in school and may quit.
- **Driving and physical activity:** Marijuana impairs judgment, complex motor skills and the ability to judge speed and time. Those who drive or take other risks after smoking marijuana are much more likely to be injured or killed.
- **Sexual health:** Teens who smoke marijuana are more likely to take sexual risks and have unwanted or unprotected sex.
- **Long-term health:** Teens' bodies and brains are still growing and maturing, so smoking anything, including marijuana, is not good for lung health. Marijuana use may also lead to addiction or mental health problems (i.e., depression, anxiety or schizophrenia). Regular marijuana use can alter normal brain

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adolescents at risk of drug abuse and for their parents. Helping adolescents learn how to counter peer pressure is one focus. "We really want to develop their confidence so they are able to say no to pressure but we really want to work with parents around reducing risk factors so they are aware of warning signs, of what could identify (their) kids as using or starting to experiment."

Dougherty-Herman said that one message that seems to resonate with teens relates to money. In her work with teens, she talks about "the amount of money we can spend on something that's unhealthy for us, as opposed to spending money on things that are healthy for us or entertain us in different ways."

Dougherty-Herman likes to share with students a website called Natural High, which offers videos of athletes such as surfers and skateboarders, and celebrities such as musicians, talking about how they attain a "natural high" through their activities rather than using drugs or drinking alcohol.

In talking with adolescents about the dangers of smoking or using marijuana, Dougherty-Herman shares with them information on how it affects their brains such as impairing memory, coordination and the ability to retain information, thus impacting learning.

Dr. Robert Young, a psychiatrist and the medical director of Restart Substance Abuse Services of Catholic Family Center in Rochester, says a major danger for adolescents using marijuana is the feeling of apathy that it generates. "That can hurt everything they would otherwise be trying to do." Marijuana smokers lose the motivation to do whatever it is they should or need to do. "It feels good, it feels relaxed, and that's all you get."

Young pointed out that the adolescent brain doesn't mature until the person is in his or her mid to late 20s. "Judgment, cognitive abilities, impulsivity in particular, keep improving as you enter adulthood, and marijuana impairs that process in every way, particularly cognitively."

Adolescents who regularly smoke, vape,

## What Parents Can Do

- Set high expectations and clear limits. Instill strong values. Let your child know that you expect her or him not to use drugs. Teach that healthy values are important to your family and how to use these values when deciding what is right and wrong.
- Talk with your child about the dangers of drug use, including marijuana. Young people who do not know the facts may try drugs just to see what they are like. Start talking with your child at an early age about the dangers of drug use. Encourage him to ask questions and tell you about his concerns. Be sure to really listen. Do not lecture or do all the talking. Ask what he thinks about drug use and its risks.
- Use teachable moments. Discuss car accidents and other tragedies that are caused by drug use and are in the news or your child's life.
- Help your child handle peer pressure. Peers and others can strongly influence young people to try drugs. As a parent, your influence can be even stronger in helping your child learn to be confident, make healthy choices, and resist unhealthy peer pressure. Tell her that it is OK to say "No!" to risky behaviors and mean what she says. Help her find and spend time enjoying positive interests that build self-esteem.
- Help your child deal with emotions. Especially during the teen years, many young people face strong emotions for the first time. Teens sometimes get depressed or anxious and might consider drug use to try to escape these feelings and forget problems. Explain that everyone has these feelings at times, so it is important for each person to learn how to express his feelings, cope with them, and face stressors in healthy ways that can help prevent or resolve problems.
- Set a good example. Avoid using tobacco and illicit drugs. Minimize alcohol use, and always avoid drinking and driving. Be a good role model in the ways you express, control and relieve stress, pain or tension. Actions do speak louder than words.
- Get a professional evaluation. If you think your child is using drugs, tell your child's doctor your exact concerns. Your child's doctor can help.

*Source: HealthyChildren.org (website from the American Academy of Pediatrics)*

or consume marijuana in food products end up without the quality of intellectual capability and cognitive ability they otherwise would have, Young said. "It's tragic, really."

Young cited a man in his late 20s that Young treated in his private practice. Young diagnosed that the man was using marijuana to deal with anxiety. Now that the man is getting proper treatment and has given up smoking marijuana, "he feels a hundred times better...he's starting to live. It took a long time; it took a lot out of him for a long time." The key is figuring out why a person is using the marijuana and then getting the person the proper treatment.

It's very easy for teens to get marijuana, Elias and Young said. "It's in all the schools. Everyone who wants it can get it," Young said. Parents shouldn't fantasize that their children aren't exposed to it. Parents should also get to know their kids' friends because peers are their biggest influence.

Of course, talking to adolescents about the dangers of marijuana is an important task for parents, but how they go about that is key, said Dougherty-Herman, Elias and Young. Elias advised a conversational approach rather than lecturing. Parents should ask their children: "What have you learned about it?" and then share their own thoughts: "This is what I know."

Elias, a parent herself, admitted that this can be a challenge for parents. "Your need to protect (your children) kicks in and sometimes it hinders your ability to listen."

The bottom line is that from the time children are young, parents need to forge an open relationship with their children. "You want to know what's going on and you want to be able to discuss it with your child," Young said. "You can't ultimately keep your child from trying anything." However, if a teen does share with his or her parent, then the parent can give advice, and hopefully the child will follow that advice.

*Jane Sutter is a Rochester-area freelance writer.*

## How marijuana use affects health and well-being: *Continued from page 1*

development in adolescents.

### Signs of Marijuana Use:

- Recognizing the signs of drug use is the first step in getting help for your child, but some signs are vague. Consider marijuana or other drug use if your child:
- Spends less time with family and friends and more time alone or away from home.
- Often seems moody or irritable.
- Begins to skip classes, often shows up late for school, or has a drop in grades.
- Buys things like T-shirts with pro-marijuana messages or symbols.
- Loses interest in hobbies.

- Comes home high (talkative, giggly, red or glassy eyes) or goes straight to his room.
  - Smells of marijuana.
  - Possesses drugs or drug paraphernalia.
- While any single behavior may suggest that a child needs help, these behaviors do not, in themselves, indicate that a child is likely to engage in ongoing sexually harmful behaviors. For more information about concerning behaviors or about resources, call the Stop It Now! confidential helpline at 1-888-PREVENT (1-888-773-8368).

*Source: Stop It Now!*

# Watch for These Warning Signs of Abuse in Minors

No longer wants to see a **particular person** they had been close to

Declining **academic** performance

Tries to hide use of **technology**

No longer interested in **activities** they used to enjoy

Changes in **personality**

Demonstrates **aggressive behavior** or constantly angry

Tries to get minors **alone**

Commits physical and emotional **boundary violations**



**Withdraws** from family or friends

Keeps **secrets** with minors

Gives lavish **gifts** to minors

Allows or encourages minors to **break laws** or rules

Is overly interested in **spending time** with minors

Has **inappropriate** or suggestive conversations with minors

Does not believe the **rules** apply to them (or, does not follow rules or protocols)

Takes **photos** without approval, or asks minors to send them photos

## ... and These Warning Signs of Perpetrators





ROMAN CATHOLIC  
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

## Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:  
Tammy Sylvester,  
Diocesan Coordinator of  
Safe Environment Education  
and Compliance,  
585-328-3228, ext. 1252  
or [Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org](mailto:Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org).

*Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.*

*To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:*

Deborah Housel  
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;  
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,  
ext. 1555  
[victimsassistance@dor.org](mailto:victimsassistance@dor.org).

*All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.*

## ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

### ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

#### CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

##### Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>  
*PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.*

##### NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>  
*A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.*

### FOR PARENTS:

#### Common Sense Media

<https://www.common sensemedia.org/parent-concerns>  
*A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education*

##### Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

##### iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>  
*Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies*

##### Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>  
*Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America*

### LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

**Bivona Child Advocacy Center**  
(Monroe, Wayne counties):  
[www.BivonaCAC.org](http://www.BivonaCAC.org)  
585-935-7800

**Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:**  
607-737-8449  
[www.chemungcounty.com](http://www.chemungcounty.com)

**Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:**  
315-253-9795  
[www.cacofcayugacounty.org](http://www.cacofcayugacounty.org)

**Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program**  
(Ontario County):  
[www.cacfingerlakes.org](http://www.cacfingerlakes.org)  
315-548-3232

**Darkness to Light organization:**  
[www.d2l.org](http://www.d2l.org)

**STEUBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:**  
[www.sthcs.org](http://www.sthcs.org)  
716-372-8532

**NYS State Central Registry**  
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):  
1-800-342-3720

**NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)**  
866-313-3013

**Tompkins County Advocacy Center:**  
[www.theadvocacycenter.org](http://www.theadvocacycenter.org)  
607-277-3203

**Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:**  
585-786-8846

**Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:**  
315-531-3417, Ext. 6