

Kids and Marijuana: Not a Harmless High

Users say it makes them mellow. Proponents of legalization say it's okay to smoke. Doctors warn of its harmful effects. Researchers say that in the past decade, the number of 8th graders who have used it has doubled.

The debate about marijuana continues, but there is one point that everyone generally agrees on - kids should stay away from the drug.

"There are many popular myths about the so-called harmlessness of marijuana, but we know from research that marijuana use is risky for teens at a crucial time in their lives," said John P. Walters, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

One common myth is that the drug is safe. Marijuana puts kids at risk. It's harmful to young bodies and minds that are still developing. Marijuana affects the brain and can impair mental health, leading to increased depression and anxiety. And some health risks associated with smoking marijuana are similar to those posed by tobacco.

Kids who use marijuana regularly show a decrease in academic achievement. Even short-term marijuana use has been proven to cause problems with memory, learning, cognitive development and problem solving.

Recent research also shows that kids who use marijuana weekly are more likely to get in trouble with the law, struggle in school, have delinquent friends, engage in sex and end up in risky and dangerous situations.

Drugged driving is another danger. One roadside study of reckless drivers who were not impaired by alcohol showed that 45 percent tested positive for marijuana.

It's also a myth that marijuana is not addictive. More teens enter drug treatment for marijuana than all other illicit drugs combined. Sixty percent of teens currently in drug treatment are there because of marijuana. According to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, of all the people entering treatment for marijuana in 1999, more than half (57 percent) first used the drug by the age of 14.

Parents can help kids by countering the folklore on marijuana with real examples of how marijuana can put their futures at risk. Studies show that parents are the single most powerful influence in their children's lives. Parents who are involved and talk to their kids about drugs can keep their kids drug-free.

This article is brought to you by the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. For more information about marijuana and tips on things you can say and do to keep your child drug-free, visit www.theantidrug.com, the parent Web site of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. Look for a downloadable copy of "*Keeping Your Kids Drug-Free: A How-to Guide for Parents and Caregivers*," or call 1-800-788-2800 for a free copy.

