

Recreational Cannabis Messaging Summaries – For Clinicians at BCCH

Suggested information for a page on the BCCH website

Document Purpose: This document provides messaging, summaries and resources only on recreational cannabis and does not include guidelines surrounding medical use. A separate messaging and clinical guide will be developed for medical use in the future. Although it is illegal, many youth under the age of 19 will still engage with cannabis; the objective information provided in these messages will help youth have a well-grounded understanding of cannabis and how to manage their use.

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Cannabis Research

There is a lack of research on the benefits and risks of cannabis usage. Currently, the majority of research focuses on short term effects. Long term effects are still largely unknown. When giving advice to others, ensure they are aware it is based on the current evidence available.

Objective Information on Cannabis to Convey to Youth

Most people who use cannabis do not progress to problematic use. However, the risks of cannabis use are not fully understood; therefore, caution should be given when referring to cannabis use. Be aware that cannabis can cause impairment to attention and judgement. If you use cannabis, do not drive or engage in other potentially risky activities. People who begin using cannabis at a young age and use frequently and over a long period of time are at higher risk of long term adverse effects. Brain development continues up until approximately age 25, and regular cannabis use may adversely affect intelligence and cognitive function. In some people, cannabis use appears to trigger the onset of mood disorders and psychosis.

Cannabis & Psychosis

The use of cannabis has been linked to psychotic symptoms or psychosis for a small number of people. For most people, these symptoms go away as the drug wears off after several hours, and their thinking, feeling and perception returns to normal. The symptoms do not usually return unless cannabis is used again. A very few people, with a family history of serious and persistent mental illness or other factors in their life, may develop a longer lasting psychosis. An even smaller number of people who experience a longer psychosis may receive a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Message for Youth Using Cannabis

When using cannabis, be aware of the effects of the specific strain, strength and the method in which you are using (e.g., edibles vs. inhalation). Use small amounts and wait to feel the effects before having more. Always have a plan to stay safe – use it in a safe and familiar environment with people you trust. Avoid combining cannabis with alcohol and/or other substances, and do not drive or engage in other potentially risky activities that may cause injury. Cannabis can interact with some medications, so tell your doctor if you are using cannabis along with your current prescribed medication. Store cannabis in a safe place away from children and pets.

How to talk about Cannabis with Youth

Avoid lecturing or shaming while talking with a youth about their potential or current cannabis usage. It is important to be calm, focus on constructive dialogue, and communicate openly. Conversations should be reciprocal. To make the youth comfortable, use scenario questions or look for organic opportunities (for example, when cannabis is mentioned on TV) to speak about cannabis. Ask them if they are using cannabis, what their perceptions about cannabis are (for example, what they like and dislike about cannabis) and if they have considered or attempted to reduce or quit their cannabis use. Explore the reason for use and determine if there are alternative strategies or other resources that may replace the need for cannabis.

Message for Parents

Youth should be given objective information about cannabis and be encouraged to talk openly. If your youth is using cannabis, try to understand why they are using – it could be peer pressure or curiosity, but may be a sign of a deeper problem. If your youth exhibits sudden changes in performance or mood – this may be a sign of problematic use. A young person’s healthy connections to family and school help protect them from harm, even if they decide to use cannabis. This is one of the reasons it is important to try and maintain open, respectful communication even if a young person’s choices do not align with parental advice. If you use cannabis, store it safely away from children and pets.

Recommended Resources:

To provide to parents:

- Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre, BC Children’s Hospital, <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/cannabis>
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Cannabis. “What Parents/Guardians and Caregivers Need to Know”, <https://smh-assist.ca/wp-content/uploads/WEB-Cannabis-Information-Document-SMHA-CAMH-ENGLISH.pdf>
- Government of Canada. “Cannabis in Canada: Get the Facts”, <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/campaigns/cannabis.html>
- Government of British Columbia, “Get Cannabis Clarity”, <https://cannabis.gov.bc.ca/>
- Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction “Cannabis Communication Guide: Talking Pot with Youth” <https://ccsa.ca/talking-pot-youth-cannabis-communication-guide-youth-allies>
- Safe Storage Reference: <http://www.parachutecanada.org/news-releases/item/as-cannabis-becomes-a-legal-drug-in-canada-remember-it-can-be-poisonous-to>

To provide to youth:

- Foundry – foundrybc.ca – powered by BC Children’s Hospital, <https://foundrybc.ca/resource/cannabis>
- National Kids Help Line: <https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/cannabis-important-things-know/>
- The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health lower-risk cannabis use guidelines: <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/lrcug-for-youth>
- DrugCocktails.ca – get the facts about the risks of mixing prescription medication with alcohol and street drugs: <http://www.DrugCocktails.ca>