

Parenting on Pot: Our expert discusses the risks, rewards and recommendations

Cannabis is used by adults all over the world to take the edge off after a long day, to help ease debilitating medical conditions, or just to relax after putting the kids to bed. A 2017 survey of more than 10,000 cannabis users conducted by California cannabis company Eaze found that 1 in 5 respondents were parents, and 63% of them partake daily. These numbers certainly reflect a growing community of cannabis users in this new age of legalization for medical and recreational use in the US, but there is still a significant amount of stigma associated with cannabis consumption, especially when it comes to parenting.

Why is it that memes celebrating #winemom culture are seen as relatable, while many parents who use cannabis are still afraid to admit it to friends and other parents? It's no secret that alcohol is by far the most glorified drug in American culture, but it's pretty frustrating to realize that there are parents sitting in jail cells or fighting for custody of their children because of their medical cannabis use, while others drink alcohol in front of their kids every night, no questions asked.

"But what about the CHILDREN!?" (cue hand-wringing and Reefer Madness-esque paranoia) seems to be the last crumbling argument that proponents of the failed War on Drugs are using to support the continued prohibition of marijuana, a drug proven to be far safer than alcohol in spite of its federal Schedule 1 status. Because of its longstanding illegality, the stigma against marijuana has been deeply implanted into the American psyche for generations, and it's no surprise that parents feel that they would be judged or even vilified for their cannabis use. In fact, it's justified — cannabis use continues to be levied against parents in custody battles, court cases and family disputes, even in states with legalized adult use.

Even before giving birth, mothers face scrutiny, and while the topic of cannabis use while pregnant is controversial and the research is minimal at best, it's worth noting that an increased number of women are choosing to use cannabis medicine to ease some of the more challenging symptoms of pregnancy; a recent survey published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Network* showed a doubling in the number of pregnant women who reported using marijuana in the previous month between 2007 and 2012 (4%), compared with just over 2% in 2002. When you consider that pregnant women are often given prescription drugs to combat morning sickness and pregnancy pain, it makes sense that they would seek out alternatives that they perceive to be safe, especially as cannabis culture and education are becoming more normalized and available.

When it comes to medical use of marijuana, many parents have found that they prefer the relief and cognitive presence offered by cannabis as opposed to opiates or other prescription drugs. While interviewing parents for a Leafly piece last year, writer Meg Hartley noted, "the thing that people don't seem to realize is that having a chronic condition can severely and negatively impact one's ability to parent, and pharmaceutical medications often come with side effects that exacerbate this problem. In many cases of chronic illness sufferers, cannabis is the option that yields the best ability to parent."

Whether using it for medical or recreational purposes, many parents report appreciating the mindfulness, emotional availability and presence they experience when interacting with their children

after consuming cannabis, in addition to the therapeutic effects.

I am certainly not suggesting that cannabis use in front of children is a good idea. In fact, there are a host of risks that should be assessed when navigating the waters of parenting on pot, but I would argue that parents should treat their cannabis like they would any other medicine or intoxicant in the home. We know that second-hand smoke is dangerous in any context, and it's obvious that substances that could be harmful to children should always be kept locked away and securely out of the reach of children — including cannabis, alcohol, prescription drugs, and other chemicals. Similarly, parents' first priority should always be the safety and wellbeing of their children, and any substance that could alter an adult's reaction time or mental capacity in the case of an emergency should be carefully administered, and definitely not consumed prior to driving.

Most parents who consume cannabis do so after their children are asleep or in a discreet manner without their kids' knowledge. When doing so, it's important to know your effective dose, and to refrain from experimenting with new consumption methods or dosages when children may be present. Many parents enjoy vaping or edibles as an inconspicuous way to consume cannabis, but should be wary of delayed or increased intoxicating effects of edibles, as strengths and reactions vary widely. It may be a good idea to start with edibles that come in 5mg (or less) "microdose" servings, but regardless of strength, locking up cannabis edibles is critically important, especially since they often look like a treat kids might enjoy.

As cannabis becomes more ubiquitous among legal states and throughout the world, the stigma and misinformation surrounding the plant will surely diminish, and hopefully we can get to a place where drug education for children is actually science-based, unbiased, realistic and informative — a far cry from the "Just Say No" messaging and DARE program scare tactics that were ingrained in so many of us. In the meantime, recreational or medical cannabis use presents a unique opportunity for parents to have honest, age-appropriate conversations with their kids about marijuana and other substances.

When talking to your kids about cannabis, it's important to tell the truth about why people consume it, and to stick to the facts. Research shows that heavy cannabis use among adolescents can be detrimental to the developing brain, for example, but the gateway drug theory has been thoroughly debunked, so it's wise to stay away from that message. Be honest about what you know and don't know, and encourage your children to come to you with their questions about cannabis and other intoxicants — if you don't know the answer, do the research and get back to them with your findings. It's not your fault that you didn't get a good drug education, but it's your responsibility to ensure that your children have more reliable information than you did. Children are often capable of understanding more nuance than we give them credit for, and the simple fact is that they will most likely encounter cannabis at some point in their adolescent years, so it's up to parents to make sure they are prepared with accurate and up-to-date information.

As the stigma fades and more parents come out of the cannabis closet, it is my hope that these important conversations will happen more and more frequently, and can complement improved drug education programs offered in schools. Sasha Simon, of the Drug Policy Alliance, is part of a pilot program that seeks to make those improvements: "There's been a lot of confusion societally, not just for children," she says. "Most people have some type of drug in their life — alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine... The idea is to model it after sex ed," she says. "We know abstinence doesn't stop sex, and [the same goes with drugs]. The majority try it before high school and the goal is to make sure they

have realistic information and skills.” [Check out “Safety First: A Reality Based Approach to Teens and Drugs”, for more tools and resources to help with these conversations.]

Ultimately, we are still at a place where most adults don’t have all the information either, and all we can ask of parents is that they do the best they can when it comes to cannabis and their family, just as they do when they make decisions about their children’s food choices, health and extracurricular activities. At the very least, I think we can agree that parents deserve to be able to relax and live a balanced lifestyle at least as much as any other adult human, especially in a society as overworked, tense and anxiety-inducing as ours.