A Public Health Perspective on Teen Cannabis Use

Every time marijuana legalization is brought up, there’s someone clutching their pearls and yelling, “But what of the children?” And it’s a valid concern, but the truth is, according to national surveys, use among people younger than 18 has gone down a bit since 2009 and has remained unchanged since 2013. But maybe that’s to be expected. “If your parents are doing it, you don’t want to do it,” jokes Joseph Hyde, a national expert in substance use. He credits declining youth substance use to common-sense drug use prevention messages that encourage kids to be healthy and protect their growing brains.

There’s been speculation that legalization will cause teen use to skyrocket, and I asked Hyde for his thoughts on this speculation. “In the 39 states where medical marijuana is legal, teen use does not appear to be affected one way or the other,” he said. But recreational legalization is too new for thorough and conclusive research to be done. “To date there is no compelling evidence to say that recreational legalization would either increase or decrease teen use,” Hyde said. “What the data is saying now is that the rates of cannabis use in Colorado among teens (for instance) is basically the same as the national average, but there is insufficient data to draw conclusions.”

But as data is gathered, no matter which side the evidence falls on, Hyde believes one thing is clear. “I don’t think kids under 18 should be using any drugs. I think that it’s not about morality or the law, it’s about possible neurocognitive concerns. [At that age] the brain is rapidly growing and changing. It’s going through that whole transformational process where new cells are growing and old ones are being
killed off, and nobody exactly knows what the impact of cannabis ... might have on the adolescent brain. The research is all over the map. And because of it being all over the map, it's hard say anything with much confidence. So when it comes to a developing brain, it's better to be safe than sorry.”

However, some short terms effects are clear. If kids are smoking a lot, their memory won’t be as sharp and their focus won’t be as good, which are important qualities for a kid to succeed in school. But when it comes to substance use of any kind, the concern isn’t just that a kid’s school experience that could suffer. Hyde says that kids who are frequent users — which he defines as kids who smoke two or three times a week or more - often end up with underdeveloped social skills. Hyde says that building the confidence and dealing with uncomfortable parts of real life like conflicts with friends or family members or initiating and having a budding romance with another teen are important aspects of growing up that get stunted if there’s a substance flowing through the bloodstream.

“Being in the moment, feeling uncomfortable about an encounter and doing it anyway despite the discomfort is an important life lesson. There are some things in life we need to do by our own choosing and fully sober,” Hyde concludes.