

Resources to Talk to Your Children About the Legalization of Cannabis in Illinois

Dear CPS Parents and Families,

As you may be aware, recreational cannabis for adults will be legal in Illinois starting Jan 1, 2020. With the health and safety of your children being our top priority, we are writing to inform you of the potential health risks cannabis use can have on children and teens, as well as how to discuss the dangers of marijuana consumption with your children.

While there may be a perception that cannabis is a harmless substance, it is not. Studies have shown that cannabis use can affect developing brains in children and teens. Those who frequently consume cannabis can experience decreased ability to learn, loss of short term memory, reduced attention span, and lowered ability to concentrate and to solve problems. The chemicals in cannabis also reduce coordination, judgment, and reaction time, which can lead to accidents and injuries.

While most children and teens who try cannabis do not become addicted to it, early use of this drug is associated with an increased risk of substance abuse disorders in later teen and adult years. Multiple studies show that those who become daily users before the age of 17 are less likely to finish high school or attend college and are more likely to become addicted to other drugs or attempt suicide as adults. Heavy use of cannabis has been linked to mental health problems like depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, paranoia, and psychosis.

One lesson we have learned from other states is that cannabis legalization leads to higher rates of use among pregnant women. Cannabis use during pregnancy can harm a fetus. It is associated with poorer growth while in the womb, lower birth weight, and a greater likelihood of needing intensive care after birth. In the long term, kids who were exposed to cannabis in utero are more likely to have learning problems in early childhood than kids who were not exposed.

We also know that edible forms of cannabis, such as brownies, cookies, and candies, are particularly enticing to children and can cause an increased risk of childhood cannabis poisonings. Drug doses that are appropriate for adults can be harmful, or even deadly, for children and teens, and can impair their developing brains. Childproof packaging and safe storage of cannabis that is locked and out of sight are necessary to protect curious children and teens from danger.

Finally, today's varieties of cannabis are far more potent than those of the past. Levels of THC, the psychoactive agent in cannabis, are up to four times higher in plants grown now compared with those grown in the 1990s, and concentrated waxes and oils have much higher levels. In other words, even small amounts of these very potent products, eaten or inhaled, can be poisonous—especially for children.

Please remember:

- Use of vaping devices, vaping liquids, cannabis, and tobacco-related products are strictly prohibited on school property. Consequences for violating this rule are detailed in the [Student Code of Conduct](#).
- Even after Jan 1, 2020, buying or using cannabis for recreational purposes in Illinois will still be illegal for anyone under the age of 21.
- Frequent cannabis use is dangerous for children and teens and can harm their developing brains.
- Symptoms of cannabis poisoning include excessive sleepiness, difficulty sitting up or walking, trouble breathing, or hallucinations. Please watch for these symptoms and seek medical care for any of these health concerns immediately.
- All forms of cannabis should be stored in childproof containers and locked out of reach and sight of children and teens.

For more information on cannabis and how to talk with children about it, please explore the following resources:

- National Institute on Drug Abuse: Marijuana Fact Sheet for Teens - <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/marijuana-facts-teens/letter-to-teens>
- Washington State: Fact Sheet for Adolescents - <http://learnaboutmarijuanawa.org/factsheets/adolescents.htm>
- Children's Hospital Colorado: Talking to Kids About Marijuana - www.childrenscolorado.org/conditions-and-advice/marijuana-what-parents-need-to-know/talking-to-kids-about-marijuana/
- Partnership for Drug-Free Kids: How to Talk About Marijuana - <https://drugfree.org/article/how-to-talk-about-marijuana/>
- Stanford's Children's Health: Talking with Your Teen About Marijuana - <https://healthier.stanfordchildrens.org/en/talking-with-your-teen-about-marijuana/>
- Huffington Post: How to Talk to Kids About Weed - https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2018/10/16/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-weed_a_23562588/
- Stanford Medicine: Cannabis Prevention Toolkit - <https://med.stanford.edu/cannabispreventiontoolkit.html>
- Prevention First Fact Sheets - <https://www.prevention.org/professional-resources/substance-abuse-prevention-professionals/>
- Smart Approaches to Marijuana - <https://learnaboutsam.org/>

If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to the Office of Student Health and Wellness at OSHW@cps.edu.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Fox, MD
Chief Health Officer
Chicago Public Schools

Allison Arwady, MD, MPH
Acting Commissioner
Chicago Department of Public Health