

## **Op-Ed: *Marijuana is Riskier Than You Think***

Ever wonder why kids get the idea that marijuana is harmless? Just take a look around. It's in blockbuster teen movies, popular songs and jokes on late night television. It's in magazines, on clothing, and even on the Internet. It's no surprise that despite the accumulating scientific evidence of the harm that marijuana can do, kids – and many parents – still see the drug as “no big deal.”

In fact, marijuana use by kids *is* a big deal, and it is a serious problem in our community. “We are seeing more and more young kids smoking marijuana every year,” says [LOCAL HEALTH OFFICER]. “Last year in our community, [INSERT NUMBER] of kids were admitted into drug treatment for marijuana use. Marijuana is not only bad for our children, it is bad for our schools, our families and our entire community. We need to do something to stop the trend.”

Nationwide, kids use marijuana more than *all* other illegal drugs combined. Many parents are surprised to learn that kids as young as 12 or 13 are using the drug. In fact, between 1991 and 2001, the number of 8<sup>th</sup> graders who used marijuana doubled from one in ten to one in five.

Marijuana is riskier than people think, especially for kids. Research shows that the drug can lead to a host of significant health, social, learning and behavioral problems in young users.

Kids who use marijuana are more likely to struggle in school. Marijuana impairs the ability of young people to concentrate and retain information during their peak learning years, when their brains are still developing. Even short-term use can cause problems with memory, learning, cognitive development and problem solving. Research also shows a link between adolescent marijuana use and a decrease in academic achievement.

[QUOTE FROM A LOCAL OFFICIAL ABOUT NEGATIVE EFFECTS]

Some of the effects of marijuana can last a lifetime. Prolonged use of the drug leads to some changes in the brain that are similar to those caused by cocaine, heroin and alcohol. For some young users, marijuana can lead to increased anxiety, panic attacks, depression and other mental health problems. Kids who use marijuana are more likely to get in trouble with the law, lose scholarships or drop out of sports or other extracurricular activities. Kids who smoke marijuana are also more likely to take risks, such as having sex, committing crimes or driving under the influence.

Marijuana is addictive. It's news to many parents that more teens go into drug treatment with a primary diagnosis of marijuana dependency each year than any other illicit drug. Among drug treatment facility admissions for marijuana in 1999, more than half first used marijuana by the age of 14, and 92 percent by the age of 18. Marijuana use is also three times more likely to lead to dependence among adolescents than adults. New

research tells us that early marijuana use can also lead to other drug addictions later in life.

[QUOTE FROM A LOCAL TREATMENT FACILITY]

What can parents and other adults do to help educate children? First of all, they need to become educated themselves.

“Some adults may have used a less potent form of marijuana in their youth. They may think that if they survived just fine, so will their children. But that isn’t necessarily the case. Marijuana is more potent now and there is much better science today about its harmful effects. Adults in our community need to take marijuana seriously and learn about the dangers of the drug,” says [COMMUNITY LEADER].

Parents should talk to their kids about the risks of marijuana use and become more involved in their children’s lives. While they may feel there is nothing they can do to overcome the influence of their children’s peers and popular culture, the truth is far different.

Research repeatedly shows that parents are the most powerful influence on their children when it comes to drugs. In a recent study, 49 percent of teens who had not tried marijuana credited their parents with the decision – more than five times the number of teens who cited peer influence. If the only references to marijuana in your house come from films, jokes, songs or TV shows, your children are not getting the whole story.

It is time for a “wake-up call” to parents, community leaders, family physicians, the media, teachers and other adults who influence kids in our community. We need to let kids know how marijuana affects their minds and their bodies; how it interferes with schoolwork, sports and scholarships; and how it can affect their futures. And we have to let kids know that marijuana can be as dangerous as so-called “hard drugs” and can have many of the same consequences. Young people need to know that despite popular images of marijuana around them every day, marijuana use is not cool or a laughing matter.

For more information, please contact [LOCAL DRUG COALITION].

[ADD YOUR NAME, TITLE, ORGANIZATION AND A ONE SENTENCE DESCRIPTION OF YOUR ORGANIZATION]