



Cannabis  
Legalization



University  
of Victoria

Canadian Institute for  
Substance Use Research

CHANGE &  
OPPORTUNITY  
FOR SCHOOLS

# Quick summary of cannabis regulations

The federal [Cannabis Act](#) is the overarching law that defines which forms of cannabis are legal, how the drug may be sold and how much an individual may possess. In B.C., cannabis is governed by the [Cannabis Control and Licensing Act](#) and the [Cannabis Distribution Act](#). These federal and provincial laws, together with amendments to several other pieces of legislation, create a legal context in B.C. in which:

## People under 19 years of age may not:

- consume, possess, produce, supply, sell, purchase or attempt to purchase cannabis or cannabis accessories unless authorized to possess medical cannabis
- enter or be inside a cannabis retail store or production facility
- participate in the growing of cannabis at home, or work in an environment associated with cannabis
- promote or advertise cannabis
- operate a vehicle, whether or not the vehicle is in motion, while there is cannabis in the vehicle, unless the cannabis belongs to an adult passenger, was produced by a federal producer, and is still in unopened original packaging or is not readily accessible by the driver or passengers

## Adults over 19 years of age may:

- possess and share up to 30 grams of dried cannabis or equivalent in a public place, and up to 1,000 grams in a private place such as their home
- consume cannabis in locations authorized by the provincial government and local jurisdictions
- grow up to four cannabis plants per household for personal use, from licensed seeds or seedlings purchased from authorized suppliers
- make legal cannabis-containing products (food/drink) at home
- purchase limited amounts of fresh/dried cannabis, cannabis oil, edibles, extracts, topicals, seeds or plants from retailers authorized by the province

## Adults may not:

- give, sell or promote cannabis or cannabis accessories to anyone under 19 years of age
- allow a minor to consume in a place under their control
- ask or allow a minor to purchase cannabis for them
- smoke or vape cannabis in the workplace
- use cannabis in regular transport vehicles or operate a vehicle while impaired by cannabis
- operate a vehicle, whether or not the vehicle is in motion, while there is cannabis in the vehicle, unless the cannabis was produced by a federal producer, is still in unopened original packaging or is not readily accessible by the driver or passengers
- use a dangerous solvent (e.g., butane) to process cannabis

## Specifically for schools, a person must not consume cannabis:

- in or on school property
- on a sidewalk or boulevard beside school property

**For more information see [Get Cannabis Clarity](#)**

# Cannabis Legalization

## CHANGE AND OPPORTUNITY FOR SCHOOLS

Cannabis is now legal for adults in Canada. As a result, schools will face some new challenges. But new opportunities will emerge as well.

This guide provides schools with a framework to:

- identify key issues and opportunities
- adopt a holistic approach to cannabis and well-being
- access information to make informed and thoughtful decisions
- address the needs of students, parents and the greater school community

The intent of this guide is not to tell schools what to do. It does not assume that there are one-size-fits-all solutions to the challenges and opportunities schools may face as a result of cannabis legalization.

## A teachable moment

Cannabis – like other psychoactive substances – has been used by humans for thousands of years. Legalization provides adults who use cannabis with a safe supply produced and sold under strict regulation. The *Cannabis Act* still prohibits cannabis use and possession among youth. It may result in fines and/or charges being applied under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (for youth aged 12 to 17 years) or the *Cannabis Control and Licensing Act* (for youth aged 18 years). Yet the changes happening in our society involving adult cannabis use can potentially help students develop a broader understanding of drug use, and skills to make informed decisions, in preparation for becoming adults.

Young people benefit from developing competencies that will allow them to grow and thrive in their communities. As they grow up, youth will be well served by having a more complete understanding of cannabis and substance use more generally, which could provide students with the confidence to make informed decisions about cannabis and other drug use. Legalization offers schools a unique opportunity to advance students' educational goals, and help them develop critical thinking skills for life in an ever-changing world.

### Reasons young people use drugs:



Source: McCreary Centre Society. Provincial results of 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey.

## Dialogue

Dialogue is a conversation in which two or more people seek to understand each other. While talking is a part of the conversation, listening and asking good questions are the more important skills. The goal is not to come away having convinced someone about something. It's about gaining understanding of another's perspective.



Dialogue is a vital tool, especially as we enter an era of legalized cannabis. People have different perspectives on cannabis. We do not need to think and believe alike. However, we do need to live together. That requires that we understand each other and respect the opinions, needs, and rights of others.

Open dialogue with all stakeholders in the school community – students, teachers, staff, parents, administrators and others – will help create a broader understanding of the views within our community. This understanding provides a critical foundation from which to develop shared approaches that respect everyone. Dialogue also helps participants develop the skills for the civil exchange of ideas that are so important in democratic communities. In dialogue, we discover new ideas that allow us to evolve our thinking and be lifelong learners.

For Dialogue resources see [Let's Talk Cannabis](#)

Some students might decide to use cannabis despite the legal restrictions of use on school property (i.e., no use on school grounds or on a street or boulevard right beside them). When these situations occur, they can create an opportunity for teachers and students to discuss the complex nature of cannabis, who uses it, and why. An open discussion about legalization can help young people decide for themselves what role cannabis may or may not have in adulthood.

## Opportunities for schools

Cannabis legalization offers a number of rich growth and learning opportunities for the entire school community. Below are some of the main ways schools can embrace and benefit from the changes taking place in our society.

### Health promotion and school connectedness

Now is an ideal time to think about how the whole school can operate in a healthy way. A health-promoting school is “one that constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working.”<sup>1</sup>

One way to promote the creation of a health-promoting school is to establish an environment that facilitates learning by fostering a caring and inclusive community. A healthy school involves all members of the school, not just students. A health-promoting school includes learning through relationships and interpersonal interactions, inside and outside the classroom.

Schools may wish to align their approach to particular cannabis use issues with the overall aim of school connectedness. Being sincere and consistent about connectedness will empower students with the skills and confidence they need in the adult world, where use of drugs (such as alcohol and cannabis) is common. Activities and approaches related to staff, students and parents can all contribute to building connectedness that supports health.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, 'What Is a Health Promoting School?', 2018, [https://www.who.int/school\\_youth\\_health/gshi/hps/en/](https://www.who.int/school_youth_health/gshi/hps/en/).

**A health-promoting school supports teachers and other staff.** It seeks to assist them in facilitating learning, offering guidance and providing exemplary models. Staff are able to form strong and healthy relationships with students. Teachers play a critical role in student development by encouraging them to be curious, attentive and collaborative. With legalization, issues related to cannabis may be examined with the same curiosity and appreciation for honest, open dialogue as any other complex topic. Bringing in external “experts” to tell students what they are supposed to think or believe is likely to be counterproductive as this can make it more difficult to have an open discussion of different points of view.

#### Helpful staff-centred policies might offer support for:

- a variety of interactive learning resources (including those adaptable for cannabis education)
- professional development in inquiry-based learning
- personal well-being and self-management within a caring community

**A health promoting school can nurture connectedness with and among students.** Supportive social relationships are key contributors to a student’s well-being, which includes their relationship with substances such as cannabis. Encouraging a sense of value and belonging within the school community is critical. Students most vulnerable to adverse impacts from cannabis use are often part of a sub-community in which drug use plays a social role. A healthy school promotes strong social ties within the school that reduce the extent to which students are drawn to cannabis use to meet social needs.

#### Helpful student-centred policies might focus on:

- creating interactive classroom environments in which students work together and appreciate diverse perspectives and skills
- ensuring that shared spaces within the school (e.g., gym, hallways, library, open spaces, playgrounds) are designed and operated to be inclusive, interactive social spaces
- crafting mechanisms by which all students are honoured as contributing members of the school community

Even approaches to discipline can play a role in fostering learning and (re)connection. Research shows that zero-tolerance policies leading to suspending or expelling students are not effective and often cause harm to those committing the infractions. Rather than ensuring the safety of other students, it exposes them to a climate demoralized by removals, drop-outs, and loss of aspiration to reach their potential.

#### Approaches to student discipline can positively impact school culture by:

- helping students *learn* from mistakes rather than *pay* for their actions
- being realistic about student behaviour and its actual/potential impact on the school and other members of the school community
- recognizing the paramount importance of keeping students connected to their peer group and school community



**A health-promoting school can support parents.** Parents are better able to help their children learn how to make good decisions and become reasonable, caring adults when the school is a partner. This goes beyond jointly monitoring students' progress and encouraging involvement in parent advisory committees. It also involves the ways in which the school seeks to equip and connect parents – with one another, with community opportunities and with resources that enable skillful parenting. Cannabis is just one area in which the school's support of parents can pay dividends both at school and at home.

**Strategies supporting partnerships with parents may:**

- promote dialogues with parents of diverse backgrounds around a variety of topics and issues facing the school and larger community
- support joint learning events for teachers, other staff and parents in addressing topics of shared interest including substance use
- recognize that parents are a resource but also need support

**Additional resources** are available at [Helping Schools](#), a Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research website with lesson plans and other resources for grades 4 to 12.

To summarize insights from this section, there is much to be gained from approaches that aim to help all members of a school community manage personal and shared health. What is important is creating the feeling that all school members are wanted, valued, and have a voice, whether cannabis use is specifically mentioned or not. Establishing that sense of inclusiveness and openness will have a substantial impact on the number of cannabis-related issues in the school.

## Nurture critical thinking

In today's society, children and youth receive numerous mixed messages about how to live, stay healthy, and enjoy life. They are asked to respect others and shun certain behaviours. The legalization of cannabis has been criticized by some as sending a mixed message. How can young people make sense of conflicting messages and make decisions that enhance their well-being?

Schools aim to provide a safe learning environment where students can explore who they are, learn how to make informed decisions, and develop strategies, critical thinking, and resiliency they can call upon when facing new and challenging situations.

All methods and aspects of promoting critical thinking from BC's K-12 curriculum can be applied to dialogues about cannabis:

- Encouraging students to reflect on their own assumptions and values helps them ground their thinking in a critical frame
- Comparing and questioning sources of information allows students to assess the utility of information for different purposes
- Developing media awareness – raising questions about how, for example, business advertising helps shape the way media frames an issue, and why – is a great way to help students develop critical thinking skills
- Engaging the class in dialogue (where the goal is further understanding of the other rather than winning an argument) is yet another way to deepen critical thinking and encourage respectful relationships

In relation to cannabis, critical thinking gives students the power to manage their well-being. Ways schools can help develop critical thinking related to cannabis include:

- Having open conversations about cannabis and drug use that encourage students to apply the same critical skills they use to learn about other topics inside and outside of school
- Asking more questions that encourage reflection and dialogue, rather than stating a “fact” which tends to shut down conversation or spark unproductive debate
- Using existing curriculum to explore the human phenomenon of drug use while exploring different cultures and historical periods, or drawing attention to allusions to drugs in literature or other texts, nurtures critical thinking about drugs in a wide range of learning contexts

## Critical drug education

The legalization of cannabis provides schools with an opportunity to build drug literacy. Drug literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to navigate our physical and social world, in which cannabis and other psychoactive substances play a part.

Effective drug education is about helping students develop competencies that increase their ability to manage their own well-being. This skill is vital in a world in which cannabis and many other drugs are available. Some of the critical competencies, as defined by the [Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research](#), include:

- assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities and societies
- explore and appreciate diversity in the reasons people use drugs, the impacts of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs. bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks, benefits and harms related to drugs



Since drug use has been integral in human history and development, these competencies cut across all subject areas. Opportunities abound in English Language Arts, Social Studies, Science and Mathematics, among others. Traditional drug education efforts have not been successful partly because they have focused on drugs themselves rather than the place of drugs in past and present human societies.

### Suggested resources:

- [TeachBC](#) (search for “cannabis” or “drug education”)
- [iMinds](#)
- [Cycles](#)
- [OPHEA Cannabis Resources](#) (Ontario)

## Increase resilience

Human beings, like all living things, need resilience to overcome challenges and thrive in life.

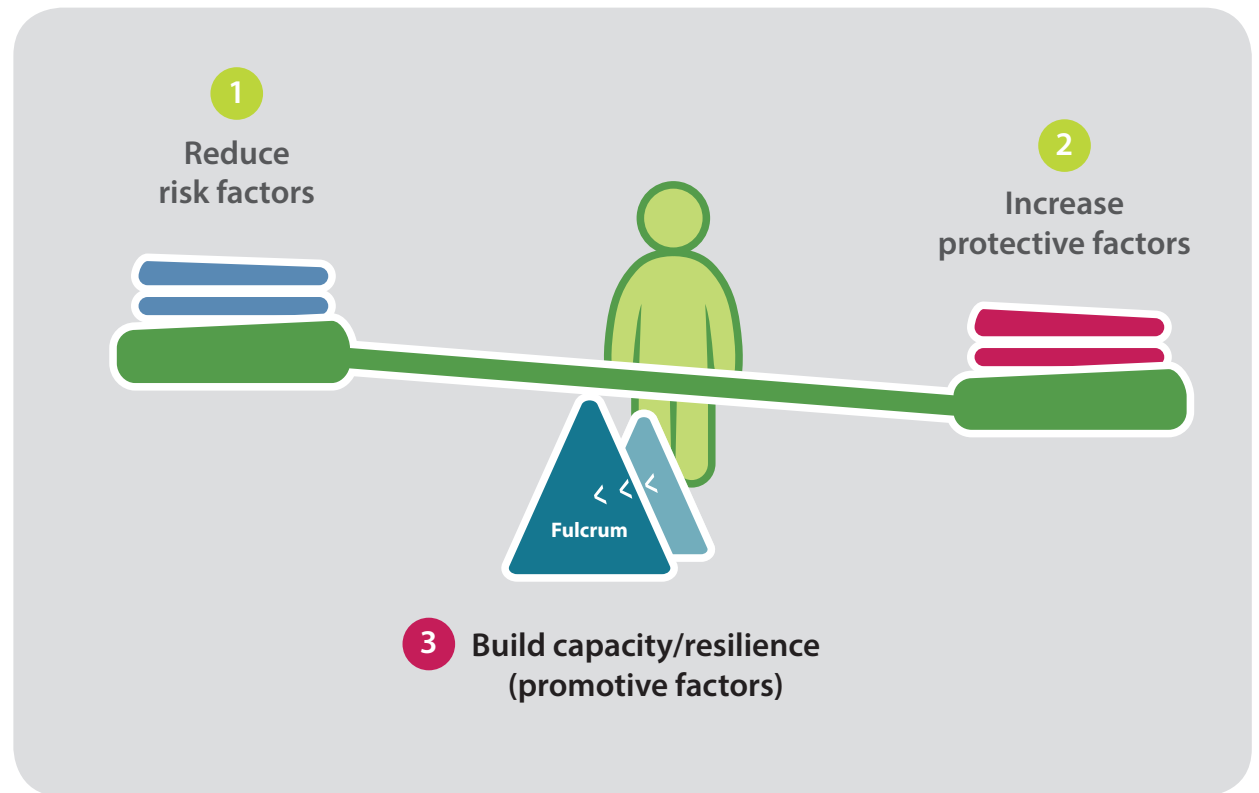
Cannabis legalization provides schools with an opportunity to help young people develop resilience and other skills needed to both manage their drug choices and maintain their health. Teachers and staff can help students question messages about cannabis and other substances such as alcohol, tobacco and caffeine.

Health includes having the capacity to maintain balance and stability, in addition to minimizing risks and maximizing safety. Before legalization, drug conversations focused almost exclusively on ways to reduce risk and increase protection. For decades this meant emphasizing “just say no” messages and building skills to resist peer pressure. However, drug use and the impact on health is more complex. Taking risks does not always lead to harm, and in some cases what might cause harm in one young person may strengthen another.



In the model to the right, resilience represents a third component in helping young people avoid or mitigate drug use harms. By focusing on resilience, schools can help students build the capacity to increase control over their own well-being. Building a student's capacity to manage cannabis and other drugs is akin to moving the fulcrum in the diagram. It does not mean ignoring risk and protective factors. It means recognizing that, in real life, risk can never be eliminated. Young people need to learn how to assess risk, marshal resources to take on challenges, and adapt in the face of setbacks.

A resilience focus recognizes that people do not exist or develop in isolation. Resilience is not only about individual capacity. It is about equitable access to the resources that can help us face challenges successfully. A resilience orientation promotes school practices and policies that eliminate inequities and reduce barriers to the resources all students need.



**Nurturing resilience** fits well with the broader scope of B.C.'s new K-12 curriculum with its emphasis on core competencies. In particular, resilience building is linked to critical and creative thinking. But it also involves learning to regulate emotions, manage stress and persevere in difficult situations, among other life skills.

*"Human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they experience trusted others as standing behind them."*

—John Bowlby

## Schools can nurture resilience by reflecting on some of the following:

### Enhancing belonging and connectedness

- Do all staff, students and parents feel they belong in our school?
- How do/might we nurture this sense of belonging?

### Focusing on students' capacity to manage their own well-being

- How do/might our teaching and learning activities build self-management capacity and promote social responsibility?
- How do/might we address cannabis with a focus on building the "capacity to manage" our individual and collective well-being?

### Building critical thinking and social skills

- How do/might we promote collaborative learning in which students analyze ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and norms together and, ultimately, develop meaning for themselves?

- What opportunities are there to incorporate discussions of cannabis into these collaborative learning activities?

### Nurturing a recognition of human limitations and the wisdom of seeking help beyond ourselves when needed

- How do/might we model being able to "relax within the scope of uncertainty"?
- How do/might we promote learning from mistakes in and out of the classroom?

### Developing storytelling skills and the ability to change our own narrative when necessary

- How do/might we encourage students to explore alternative interpretations to "life facts" (those things that happen/have happened and that we cannot change)?
- What opportunities do our regular teaching and learning activities offer for nurturing this capacity?

## Understanding why people use cannabis

Before legalization, it was difficult to talk openly about cannabis. This led to myths that persist today. For example, many of us still believe teens use cannabis because of peer pressure. Yet youth surveys say otherwise.

**The most common reason young people use cannabis, alcohol and other drugs is to have fun** (65%). Of youth who have ever used alcohol or other drugs, about 30% are simply curious about what some substances feel like. Some youth use drugs to help them deal with stress (16% of boys and 25% of girls) or sadness (11% of boys and 21% of girls). About 30% said that they used alcohol or other drugs because their friends were doing it, but only 3% of boys and 4% of girls say they feel pressured into alcohol or other drug use.<sup>2</sup>

Many young people who use cannabis seem to experience some benefits. And most seem aware of potential harms. Like adults, most youth know that "no cannabis use" is safest. Some youth feel that the benefits of using cannabis can in some circumstances outweigh the harms.

<sup>2</sup> Annie Smith et al., *From Hastings Street to Haida Gwaii (Vancouver, BC: McCreary Centre Society, 2014)*, 40, [https://www.mcs.bc.ca/pdf/From\\_Hastings\\_Street\\_To\\_Haida\\_Gwaii.pdf](https://www.mcs.bc.ca/pdf/From_Hastings_Street_To_Haida_Gwaii.pdf).

**Whether drug use helps or harms a person depends on many factors.**

These include personality, relationships and environment. The reasons people use are also important (see diagram below). People who use drugs to feel good, explore or have fun with friends tend to do so in moderation. Using drugs to feel better or improve ourselves can be a little different. While people use drugs for a variety of reasons, sometimes it leads to regular or even frequent use, which does increase the risk of harm.

Most of us are familiar with the harms of using cannabis. For example, cannabis use can affect our short-term memory. Heavy, long-term cannabis use can cause lung problems. Cannabis use might trigger schizophrenia in people who are prone to the disorder. Young people who use cannabis are more likely to experience harms like learning problems or a substance use disorder because their brains are still developing. A simple narrative, centred on these risks, has evolved. But a more complex and realistic story is needed. Temporary

memory loss from cannabis use may be beneficial to people struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Cannabis can be a safer alternative for some people struggling with alcohol or opioid dependence. Some people with chronic pain problems find relief by using cannabis.

Decades of focus on harm has resulted in risk being seen as negative. Yet, we all know risk itself is not always bad. It is essential to human growth and development. Without taking risks, we would neither set nor achieve our life goals. Rather than focusing on avoiding all risk, we can help young people learn to recognize the risks of an activity and think ahead about how they can minimize harms and maximize benefits.

In real life, **the benefits and harms of any drug are not opposites along a single continuum.** Their relationship is complex as shown in the image on the following page, especially when time is factored into the equation. Risk of long-term harm is one factor (along with a person’s health status, personal values, past experiences, and degree of social connectedness) in deciding whether or not to use a drug for its short- or long-term benefits.

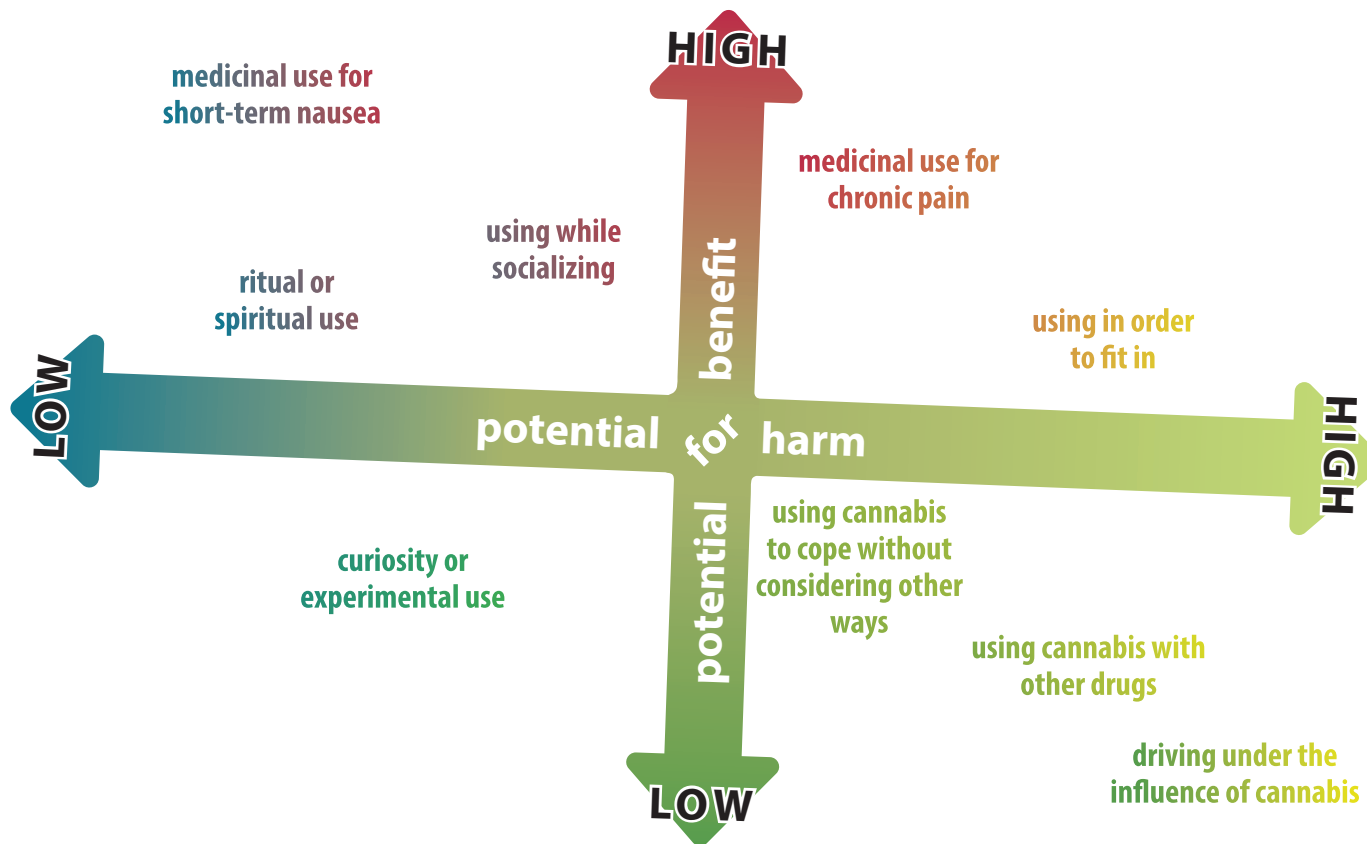
Our traditional risk orientation fails to address structures in our society, such as poverty, that may contribute to greater risk taking. For example, many parents cannot afford to put their children in organized programs that provide fun and meaning. Some of these children can turn to drugs



like cannabis as an alternate way to explore, engage with peers or make sense of their world. Sometimes our responses can make things worse. Suspending these students for cannabis use does not reform them. It disconnects them from the caring adults in their school. Without caring adults, young people are less able to manage risk.

For more information see [Here to Help](#)

Now we can talk more openly about cannabis use. **We have a chance to develop a better understanding of why some people use it, and how they can use it to optimize benefits and minimize harms.**



## Safer Cannabis Use

Teachers and other staff have an opportunity to engage students who might be using cannabis or thinking about using cannabis to think about safer ways to use the drug. The following questions, content and resources may be helpful in preparing for such conversations.



Before you use cannabis, ask yourself ...

- **Do I really want to use it?** Sometimes cannabis helps. Sometimes it makes things worse.
- **Can I trust my source?** Legal cannabis sources are tested for quality while street cannabis is not.
- **How much THC is in it?** THC or delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol is the most well-known cannabinoid. Too much THC can cause unwanted effects (e.g., psychosis, paranoia).
- **How much CBD is in it?** Cannabidiol or CBD is another cannabinoid. Unlike THC, CBD does not produce a high or intoxication. There is some evidence that CBD may block or lower some of the effects of THC and may contribute to the health benefits associated with cannabis use.

It's safer to ...

- **Avoid using too much too often**, especially if you're young. Human brains are not fully developed until early adulthood. Regular use (daily or almost daily) over time can lead to dependence, learning and memory problems. You may start needing it just to feel normal.
- **Wait at least six hours** before driving or operating machinery.
- **Avoid smoking.** Vaping or edibles are better options because they are not as harmful to your lungs. If you do smoke, don't hold in the smoke. Most of the THC is absorbed in the first few seconds.
- **Go slowly** when eating or drinking cannabis; these modes take longer to deliver effects. Once those come, you can get higher than expected. Try a little and wait an hour before using more. Same advice when trying a new type of cannabis – go slowly.

... **Continued**



## Safer Cannabis Use (continued)

It's safer to ...

- **Avoid mixing substances.** Adding tobacco to a joint means adding another drug along with cancer-causing toxins. Drinking alcohol while using cannabis intensifies the effects, including impairment, and makes them last longer than expected.
- **Avoid synthetic cannabis products.** E.g., K2 or Spice. Synthetics are designed to copy the effects of THC. The contents of most synthetics are unknown, untested and can change from product to product. They can range from being really weak to super strong. Synthetic cannabis use has been linked to seizures, irregular heartbeat, panic attacks, agitation, hallucinations and in some cases, death.
- **Skip cannabis** or seek medical advice if you have (or a member of your family has) a history of psychosis or a substance use disorder. Cannabis use increases risk that symptoms of these conditions will reappear or get worse. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, it's safest to avoid using cannabis.



For more information see:

- [The Blunt Truth](#)
- [Safer Cannabis Use](#)
- [Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines](#)



## Going forward

While legalization has changed the status of cannabis among adults, cannabis use rates are not likely to increase very much in the short term. What will change is the way cannabis is positioned within society.

As a legal substance, cannabis will likely become more socially acceptable to the general public. Rates of cannabis use will presumably depend on the same factors as alcohol and tobacco use. These include price, availability, promotion, perceived benefits, and the degree to which other options are available for achieving the same benefits. The legalization of cannabis means we must ensure students have the tools to navigate an adult world where cannabis is available and promoted.

Cannabis legalization provides a variety of regulatory tools that can be used to promote a balanced approach. What's more, legalization

invites opportunity for open dialogue with various stakeholders in the school community – students, teachers, staff, parents, administrators, and others.

Rather than focusing only on the dangers of cannabis for children and youth (i.e., what might happen), schools can choose to build capacity and resilience in students and the community. This requires a focus on the desired learning environments and connects to questions that are already top of mind for schools:

- What would a great learning environment look like?
- How can schools contribute to well-being among students? In the community?

Further, there is now space to explore and reflect on how different drugs are regulated in our society and the implications of approaches like prohibition and availability through a legal market. How do we as a society decide which approach to use for which drug? How do different approaches affect people who use drugs and their families? In these explorations, cannabis legalization becomes the beginning rather than the end of discussion. It provides multiple opportunities for staff and students to work together toward a positive learning environment, well-being in schools, and the shaping of mature adults.

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