

parental monitoring and prevention of cannabis use

introduction

One of parents' greatest fears is that their child will become involved with illicit drugs. If a young person does experiment with illegal drugs, the first drug they are most likely to try is cannabis. Studies have shown that the younger a person starts using cannabis, the greater the problems they will experience in the future. It is important for parents to know ways of preventing, or at the very least delaying, cannabis use for as long as possible.

Although parents sometimes doubt their importance, particularly during the teenage years, research indicates that they do play an important part in the development of their adolescent children. As such, parents can play a significant role in preventing cannabis use.

Research indicates that parents, and families more generally, can protect against adolescent substance use in instances where parenting skills, parent-adolescent communication and levels of warmth and affection are high. Attachment to the family and low parental conflict are also considered to be protective factors that contribute to teens choosing not to use drugs.

There are two main protective factors identified in research on this issue:

- parenting style
- parental monitoring

parental monitoring

When parents are aware of a range of aspects of their child's life —what they are doing, who they are with, and where they are, we say these they are monitoring their child.

As well as knowing what their teens are doing, parental monitoring includes:

- the expectations parents have regarding their teen's behaviour – what rules are being made?
- the actions parents take to keep track of their teen – how are the rules being enforced, i.e., how do you know that the rules are not being broken?
- the ways parents respond when their teen breaks the rules – what are the consequences and are they being enforced?

Adolescents whose parents use effective monitoring practices are less likely to make decisions that can negatively impact a wide range of health behaviours, such as having sex at an early age, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and being physically aggressive or skipping school. The effect of this supervision has been found to persist as young people age and has been found to be effective in both single and two-parent households. The protective effect of such monitoring is more noticeable with girls than in boys.

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Studies have also found that parental monitoring not only can prevent drug use, but may also lead to reduced drug use once it has begun. Put simply, the greater the perceived parental control, the lower the adolescent's substance use.

As far as cannabis specifically is concerned, the more intense the monitoring by parents, the less likely their child is to use the drug. Unfortunately, as children develop into teenagers, parents often view them as more independent and less in need of monitoring. At the same time, adolescents may not be willing to share as much information as they once did and there is often increasing conflict as emotional closeness to their parents diminishes. But, consistent monitoring throughout the teen years is critical as teens' desire for independence can bring opportunities for unhealthy or unsafe behaviours. Studies confirm that parents and the family remain important through this time, although their role often changes to a less directive way of parental monitoring.

Parental monitoring not only directly decreases the likelihood of substance use, it can also affect a child's friendship choices. Research has shown that teens who perceive their parents provide substantial support are less likely to have friends who use drugs, and those who do have friends who use drugs are less likely to start using drugs themselves.

A crucial element of monitoring is 'parental knowledge'. Parental knowledge represents what the parent actually knows versus what they are told by their teen. Monitoring represents the seeking of information, while knowledge deals with the accuracy of the information. That is, asking a child where they are going and who they will be with may not actually result in accurate information and, as such, parents are encouraged to do more than simply access information from their child.

As their children grow older, many parents believe that the level of parental monitoring should be reduced, i.e., they are growing up and they need to be given more freedom. Best described as the 'bending of the rules' (e.g., around curfews and rules about having adult supervision). This is usually in later adolescence and is often in the circumstance where prior permission for such exceptions was granted. One study that examined this practice found that teens who reported that their parents allowed them to negotiate in such a way were more likely to be sexually active and to use alcohol and cannabis than the adolescents who did not. It is important to note, however, these adolescents were also more likely to engage in sex-related protective behaviours, such as condom use, carrying protection or refusing sex when protection was not available. No information was collected on 'safer' drug use behaviour.

It is clear that parental monitoring has significant implications for adolescent cannabis use. The details of the nature of the relationship are not clear though and monitoring may have a greater impact at different stages of a young person's life. As such, it needs to be age appropriate and change over the course of the child's life to match their stage of development. Appropriate levels of behavioural control need to be applied in an environment that supports trusting and non-intrusive parent-child communication. This encourages disclosure by the child, thus ensuring that parents are able to access accurate monitoring information.

so can parents make a difference?

The adolescent years can be a challenging time for both the young person and their parents. It is a time when the child-parent relationship will change and that can be frightening, particularly for parents. Even though they are often told that their adolescent children do not value them and that they can do little to influence their teen's behavior, research continues to highlight the importance of ongoing parenting during adolescence that is built on a strong foundation from infancy.

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Parents can make a real difference in terms of either preventing, or at the very least delaying their child's future cannabis use. Parents need to be encouraged to set simple and clear rules for their children about what is expected of them and what will not be tolerated from an early age. They should know where their children are and who they are with. If the rules are broken there are consequences that will be consistently applied. This approach, provided in an environment where the children feel loved and cared about can have a protective effect on adolescent cannabis use.

So put simply, here are some practical parenting tips that can help prevent, or at least delay adolescent cannabis use:

- develop and maintain good communication with your child
- be involved in your child's life
- make rules clear and enforce them consistently
- be a positive role model
- help your children choose friends wisely