



ncpic
national cannabis
prevention and
information centre

what's the
deal?

talking with a
young person about cannabis

communication tips for parents and friends

If you are reading this booklet the chances are you have someone in mind who uses cannabis. This booklet is designed to help you talk with them more effectively about cannabis use.

Improving communication, or getting over a communication block with a young person is the key. You may feel unsure of your ability to understand them or to express your concern to them. You may fear:

- **the conversation will become awkward and emotional for both of you**
- **you will both become frustrated when talking about cannabis**
- **your discussion will escalate to a heated argument, or**
- **they will not listen to your concerns and may become even more alienated**

These are normal fears that may, in part, be based on previous experiences of trying to talk about this or other topic(s) with them. This booklet provides you with information and tips on having your concerns heard and considered. If past experiences have not worked out as well as you wanted, remain hopeful and try again. Maybe practising the skills outlined with a friend can help to improve your confidence in beginning or trying again in your relationship with the young person concerned. In this booklet you will be given tips for talking to a young person, whether they are a family member or friend, whose cannabis use you are worried about.

During adolescence many emotional and behavioural changes begin to occur, initially with physical changes. The young person may take more notice of peers rather than their family as they attempt to see themselves as individuals and decide how they want to fit in with their family, community and broader society. It is important to listen more than talk and to try to stay calm. Try to avoid ultimatums and confrontations as much as possible, and try to negotiate solutions and help them understand the worries as you see them.

Before we begin it is also useful to remember that there are a number of conversation styles that can block effective communication. You should try to avoid the following as they leave little room for the young person to find their own response or solution:

- **ordering:** *“You must, you have to...”*
- **advising:** *“Why don’t you, it would be best if...”*
- **ridiculing:** *“OK, know-it-all, you spoilt brat...”*
- **sympathising:** *“Don’t worry, you’ll feel better...”*
- **warning:** *“You’d better, if you don’t then...”*
- **lecturing:** *“Do you realise, the facts are...”*
- **diagnosing:** *“What you need is, what’s wrong with you is...”*
- **undermining:** *“You’re nothing but...”*
- **moralising:** *“You should, you ought to...”*
- **judging:** *“You are wrong, you are acting stupidly...”*
- **interrogating:** *“Why...who...how...”*

follow this simple outline:

- gather information about cannabis, and clarify what it is that worries you about the cannabis use of the young person you care about
- expressing your concern can be powerful. Don’t undervalue your potential for it having a positive impact
- set a mutually convenient time to talk about your concerns
- if you are nervous about talking to the young person, admit this to them
- use a caring and non-judgmental tone of voice
- using ‘I’ statements allows you to talk to the other person without seeming to blame them for your feelings
- express the positives about the young person

- remember that change can be difficult, but not impossible. Avoid offering easy solutions. Don't demand instant change
- dwelling on reasons for use may not be productive
- avoid debating the benefits and harms of cannabis, and try not to get sidetracked on other issues
- avoid making deadlines or giving ultimatums
- don't use conversation styles that block communication
- ask the young person to provide a solution
- seek professional help if no resolution can be achieved

gather information about cannabis

Collecting information on cannabis can help to improve your confidence when talking with a young person. Talk to a range of people about their views and attitudes toward cannabis use. Collect current and accurate information on the street names of cannabis, how common cannabis use is, and the short and longer-term consequences of using the drug. This will help you understand the drug better and the issues related to the young person's cannabis use. Using a variety of sources will also show them that you have not only taken the time to gather up-to-date information, but that you are also being even-handed in your approach to learning about the drug, rather than simply making life difficult for them. It is sometimes difficult to know where to get reliable and up-to-date information – the National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre (NCPIC) website (www.ncpic.org.au) is a great starting point.

expressing your concern can be a powerful tool. don't undervalue your potential for having a positive impact

Confronting the problem can be very difficult when you are unsure how a person will react or what the outcome of a conversation will be.

The young person may become defensive. They may try to quickly change the subject or put off having the conversation. This is normal because the topic is threatening. Don't assume that this resistance means that your conversation won't be helpful. Keep trying.

Perseverance and expressing your concern will usually be seen by the young person as a sign that you care. It is important for young people to receive feedback on their behaviour from people who care about them. But some ways are better than others.

a tip for friends

Don't be afraid but be prepared for resistance. Your friend may not initially want to have this conversation. They may even express the view that you are betraying or destroying the friendship. But that doesn't mean that you were wrong in raising your concerns. The fact that you are taking the risk in talking with your friend is a sign of how much you care.

a tip for parents

Your children will probably not want to have this conversation, however, it is important that you let them know about your concerns.

set a mutually convenient time to talk about your concerns

The setting and timing of the message can influence the outcome of a conversation, therefore setting a convenient time and place should not be underestimated.

a tip for parents

A respectful and positive approach would be to allow your son/daughter to select a time and place for the conversation.

For example:

“There’s something I’d like to talk with you about. It’s important. When can you make some time?”

Or:

“I’ll let you decide when it would be a good time to talk and you can get back to me tonight before dinner time and let me know.”

is more likely to get a positive response than:

“After dinner you and I are going to talk!”

Then, at the agreed time, e.g. after dinner, request confirmation of a convenient time. It is important to discuss this issue in private, and not in front of other children, as it shows that you respect the young person’s privacy. If your son/daughter cannot give a time, ask why this is such a problem. Listen to the answer and then state that you understand and that this is difficult for both of you but that it is important. Suggest some times again and have them think about it and get back to you with their decision.

If this approach doesn’t work, try again at a later time and get them to choose one of two or three times you offer. Forcing the issue if they are reluctant may be counter-productive. Nobody likes to feel they are being

pushed into a corner where the only options are to fight back or to give in. Try to leave some room for your son/daughter to move and manoeuvre so they feel that they have some choice in the matter.

if you feel uncomfortable about talking to the young person, admit this to them!

If you are finding that starting the conversation is difficult, remember, it is probably equally as difficult and stressful for the other person.

Admitting that you are feeling nervous and that this is a sensitive issue/ topic can help to diffuse the tension and may set a positive tone, making communication for both of you easier. If the two of you have had difficult but important conversations in the past, remind the young person of those experiences.

a tip for parents

Admitting your difficulty with the conversation can also model a way for your son/daughter to talk about these difficult topics in the future.

For example:

“I guess there are some things that happen in families from time to time that aren’t easy to talk about, for the parents or for the kids. I want to talk to you about something important and I would like to get it right. I know we have had trouble talking about difficult things in the past but I love and care about you so much. I hope you’ll give me a chance to talk about it and hear me out.”

a tip for friends

Offer your friend one or two reasons why you think this conversation is important, even though it feels uncomfortable and seems to threaten the friendship.

For example:

“I want to talk to you about something important, but I’m a bit nervous that I might make you angry. Will you give me a chance to let you know what I’m thinking?”

use a caring and non-judgmental tone of voice

The young person who is using cannabis is often well aware that this behaviour meets with the disapproval of other people, including those whose opinions they value highly.

Disapproval is often shown in a person’s tone of voice, facial expressions and body language, not just the words spoken.

Be aware of your tone of voice. Is it the tone you would like to hear if someone was raising a sensitive issue with you?

a tip for parents

Try to maintain a neutral inquiring tone. This will mean you have to keep your own feelings in check throughout the conversation. Try not to show anger, disapproval, resentment, disappointment or contempt.

“Your marks have been dropping lately and I’m concerned that things aren’t going so well for you these days.”

“I notice that we don’t talk as much these days and I’m concerned that I won’t know how to help you if you have problems.”

a tip for friends

Remember that your tone of voice reflects your respect and level of care and concern.

Try using the following:

“I’ve noticed that you seem to be pretty withdrawn from me lately and you seem to be spending more time with..... What’s going on?”

While the young person may not agree with you, persevere, they may be as uncomfortable as you are about discussing such sensitive topics.

talk about the feelings that YOU are having

When expressing your concerns, it may be helpful to use ‘I’ statements. These allow you to talk to the other person in a way that does not blame them for the way you are feeling.

For example, this sentence contains an ‘I’ statement:

“I am feeling worried about your cannabis use. I’m concerned about the risks you may be facing and I wanted to let you know that.”

Or:

“When you use cannabis, it makes me worried about the risks you are taking and I just wanted to tell you how worried I am.”

Here’s another example:

“I’m feeling worried about your cannabis use. We hardly see each other anymore and I miss spending time with you. I’m not sure what cannabis has to do with this, but I’m worried by what’s been happening to our relationship.”

Compare these examples to one that does not include an ‘I’ statement:

“The way you are running your life and using cannabis is making you a mess. Why can’t you see that and just stop?”

a tip for parents

Often young people are reluctant to talk freely with their parents about cannabis use because they fear being punished, judged, blamed or misunderstood.

Because 'I' statements focus on how you are feeling (i.e. the impact that this is having on you), your son/daughter is less likely to feel as though they are being given a lecture.

a tip for friends

'I' statements are appropriate among friends. Expressing genuine concern when problems occur is what friendship is all about. It is about communicating effectively.

If you present your concern in terms of how you are feeling, your friend may be less likely to become defensive.

express the positives about the young person

The reason you are willing to risk upsetting the young person by expressing your concern is because you care about them and admire their strengths and potential.

Remember to let them know that their cannabis use is only one aspect of them as a person. Focusing on their good points and strengths will let them know you care and provide a more balanced interaction. Find examples of things that you like about the young person and tell them.

Receiving criticism or critical feedback isn't pleasant for anyone. We may be more ready to listen if we feel valued and respected.

a tip for parents

Focusing on cannabis alone will tend to make your son/daughter withdraw from the conversation. Most of us, when receiving difficult feedback, need to know that we're not all bad.

a tip for friends

Friends often share what they like about each other. Make sure you share what you value about your friend and your friendship. Remember that cannabis is only one part of their life.

remember that change is not easy, but it's not impossible!

Whenever we face something new there is a level of anxiety that we feel about the unknown. Remember that it is not necessarily easy for a young person to quit or cut down their cannabis use. It's tempting to offer quick solutions about making changes, like:

"Just quit! That's all you have to do."

Or:

"Just stop."

Try to resist this temptation. Whether they are just experimenting or using cannabis regularly, it's likely that changing their use could be a challenge. Questions like these might be going through their mind:

- will their friends understand and be supportive, or will they be critical?
- will giving up the fun of using cannabis be worth it?
- what will replace cannabis to help them cope when they need to feel better or need to face a stressful situation?

Offering easy solutions is rarely helpful.

a tip for parents

Express your understanding of the difficulties of 'change' to your son/daughter. Easy solution statements may make them feel as if they are not being understood.

Instead of saying:

“It’s no big deal. All you need to do is walk away when your friends are using it.”

Or

“Use your willpower.”

Try this:

“I am sure it’s not going to be easy for you if you decide to change. Many people have to work hard at this and gain new information and skills to help them through. If you decide you want to change, I’d like you to know I will support you.”

Remember that most people believe that they get some benefits from using drugs. Giving these up can be hard. Helping the young person find other ways to get the ‘good’ things they think they get from cannabis is important. Don’t assume you know why they use and don’t debate the ‘pros and cons’ of using. Just let them know that you understand that change means giving up what they see as benefits of their cannabis use.

Try to learn about their thoughts:

*“What goes through your mind when you think about changing?
How do you feel about it?”*

focusing on why the young person is using cannabis may not be productive

Try to resist the temptation to offer your ideas about why the person uses cannabis because you might be wrong.

Rather than:

“I know why you smoke. You’ve always been shy and getting stoned makes you feel more comfortable with other people.”

Instead, it is helpful to focus on what you see and what impact it has on you.

For example:

“You’re the expert on the benefits cannabis use has for you. I don’t know why you like smoking so much but I’m worried that it is going to hurt you or cause you problems in the long run.”

a tip for parents

Your son/daughter’s use of cannabis is not a sign that you are a bad parent. Resist the temptation to over-think reasons why they are using it.

a tip for friends

If you express to your friend what you believe are the underlying reasons for their cannabis use, you may end up sounding like an authority figure rather than a friend.

avoid debating the benefits and harms of cannabis use

There are lots of opinions about the health and behavioural effects of cannabis use – many of them are just that – ‘opinions’.

It’s also clear that people use cannabis for many different reasons.

While it is advisable to learn as much as you can about cannabis, a conversation about your concerns can easily get derailed by listing the possible harmful effects. Stay with what you know.

Instead of this:

“I’ve read that cannabis smoking damages your lungs, your reproductive system, and your memory and attention.”

Try this:

“I’m really not an expert about the effects of cannabis. But when I see you withdrawing from your friends, giving up things you used to love doing and being so angry most of the time, I know something’s going on and that concerns me.”

This does not mean you shouldn't try to understand what they perceive as the benefits and harms of cannabis. Ask the young person what they see as the good things about using cannabis. Listen and try to summarise what they have said to you to check that you have heard it correctly and to let them know you are listening. Clarify by repeating what they said so that they know you are genuinely listening to them. Then ask if they have noticed any disadvantages to using cannabis. If they say no, suggest some of the changes that you have been noticing. Then ask them what research they have done about cannabis use. If they say none, or that they get their information from friends, suggest places that they can go to find out more about the impact that cannabis use can have (both short-term and long-term).

The conversation can easily get sidetracked with other issues. Try to stay focused on what you are specifically concerned about. If the young person sidetracks the conversation with other issues – for example, “but you don't like my friends”, “you're too strict” – try to keep your focus and avoid discussing other things at that moment.

try to keep the conversation going rather than set deadlines

Young people who use cannabis are often aware that other people are waiting for them to stop. Sometimes concerned family members or friends give them a deadline.

As a consequence the young person may become even more resistant. No-one wants to be pushed to make a big change before they're ready.

By avoiding the use of deadlines you can help promote an open and on-going conversation. Instead, acknowledge that this process may take time.

a tip for parents

Giving your son/daughter a deadline for making changes to their cannabis use may lead to conflict.

For example, instead of saying:

“Either you quit cannabis today, or you’ll be grounded indefinitely.”

Try this:

“See if you can try and cut down the amount you are smoking for the next 2 weeks. Then we’ll get together and see how you went.”

This sort of response doesn’t tie any consequences to the young person’s actions, but gives them some space to make an attempt to change.

Deadlines tend to emphasize parental power and sound like ultimatums. This can make it difficult for the two of you to really talk and listen to one another.

a tip for friends

Instead of issuing an ultimatum, offer general support for the process of getting ready to change.

For example:

“If you want to give it a go, I am happy to help you. I know that changing may be hard but I’m here for you.”

in summary, don’t block communication...

This booklet has tried to promote a communication style that encourages listening and an open, non-judgmental conversation.

It is useful to remember that there are a number of conversation styles that can block effective communication. They leave little room for the young person to find their own response or solution. Try to avoid these.

ask the young person to provide some ideas about change

If you feel that you have a reasonable level of communication with the young person ask them what they would do if they noticed one of their siblings/friends was having problems with cannabis.

For example:

“What would be some feelings you might have if you were a parent/friend in my shoes? What do you think would be a good strategy to take?”

finally, here is a summary of how parents can help minimise behaviour problems; what works and what doesn't work

what works:

great communication

This starts with a new perspective: you need to begin to see your child as an emerging adult and not as a child that will obey your every command. Therefore the way you communicate may need to change. The key to better communication with a young person is to use words that do not make them angry and resentful and get you into a battle. Here are a few suggestions:

- keep your sentences short, preferably only one sentence at a time rather than a lecture
- listen to them first, let them vent
- keep calm no matter how provocative they may become
- avoid ultimatums and painting yourself into a corner
- pick your fights, let the little things slide

If you have spent time with them and set clear boundaries, had fun together and praised them, you will find that communication will remain open with room for compromise and negotiation.

emotional support

Being interested and involved in the young person's concerns, as well as providing encouragement and affection, is important. 'Catching' the person doing something good and praising them for it will also assist.

monitoring

Keeping track of where they are and who they are with, without being unduly intrusive, can minimise behaviour problems.

boundary setting

Parents should provide clear and explicit guidelines as to what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the family.

clear consequences

Having appropriate and realistic consequences that will follow from any failure to observe the agreed rules is vital.

consistency

Applying consequences immediately and consistently when rules are broken will help reduce behaviour problems.

unity

It is easier to enforce a rule if both parents agree on that rule and on the consequences appropriate for breaking it.

what doesn't work:

inappropriate punishment

- setting age-inappropriate rules (i.e. setting rules for a young person that are too strict and would be more appropriate for a younger age group)
- setting rules and consequences without involving the young person in the decision-making process
- setting punishments that aren't carried out

what to do when all of the above fails

If communication has broken down to the point where parents or friends and the young person concerned can no longer listen to each other, then professional help may be the next step. As a parent you can consult a professional, such as your GP or a counsellor, who can support you in your efforts to improve communication with your son/daughter. If necessary this professional will also help you develop ways of encouraging them into treatment.

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