

Cannabis and Children:

A growing need to prevent harm



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Cannabis can impact the health and safety of children even before they are born. With an expected increase in cannabis use due to legalization there is an increased risk of children being exposed to cannabis. How can parents, caregivers and those who interact with children protect them from potential harms?

There is no known safe amount of cannabis during pregnancy and breastfeeding

Cannabis use during pregnancy has been increasing in Ontario.¹ Local data from our Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) cannabis survey found that 10% of residents disagreed and 24% did not know that using cannabis when pregnant could cause harm to the fetus/child. Although research is still evolving, studies suggest that cannabis use during pregnancy may increase risk for low birth weight and developmental effects as a child grows.² The chemicals in cannabis (including THC) can also pass through breastmilk so the safest choice is to not use any cannabis when pregnant or breastfeeding.²

Cannabis should be kept locked up and out of reach of children

After cannabis was legalized in Colorado, pediatric hospitalizations and poison control calls increased due to accidental consumption of cannabis.³ Young children can experience more severe cannabis intoxication symptoms than adults including extreme drowsiness and trouble breathing which in rare cases may require breathing support.⁴ Many accidental cannabis exposures are due to poor supervision or product storage.³ All forms of cannabis should be kept in a secure and locked location out of reach and visibility from children.

Cannabis impairment can affect parenting and driving

Using cannabis affects how a parent interacts with a baby/child. It affects mood, judgement, decision-making and the ability to respond to a baby's/child's needs. Somebody who is not impaired should always be available to take care of children.

Although many people are aware that using cannabis before driving increases the risk of collision, WDGPH's cannabis survey found that 15% of residents disagreed. Even more concerning is that 24% of people who had used cannabis in the past year reported driving within 2 hours of using. Driving impaired by cannabis or any drug is illegal and dangerous for everyone in the car and on the road.

Second hand cannabis smoke is harmful

Second hand cannabis smoke is harmful for everyone, but especially for children, pregnant woman, and people with certain health conditions. Cannabis smoke contains many of the same toxic chemicals as cigarette smoke.⁵ In children, it may result in illness and may also affect a child's alertness, understanding and judgement.² It is safest to not smoke or vaporize cannabis in the home, car, or around any children.

Parenting approaches can help prevent or delay youth cannabis use

Youth are less likely to use cannabis and other drugs when they have supportive adults in their lives

and someone they can talk to. Talking with kids about cannabis is most effective when started early, before they are first exposed to cannabis, and with continued dialogue. Open and non-judgmental communication, positive role modelling and establishing clear expectations around substance use can be protective factors against later substance use.⁶ Research from Colorado showed that youth who have an adult to go to for help with a problem are 30% less likely to use cannabis, and youth who know their parents think underage substance use is wrong are 72% less likely to use cannabis.⁷

Actions that WDGPH is taking

WDGPH's "Talking About Weed" campaign and website includes information for parents and other adults about how to protect children from cannabis-related harms and shares resources for starting a conversation with youth about cannabis.

WDGPH also offers support to municipalities to help them create and strengthen smoking/vaping bylaws to offer more protection to children and all community members from second hand smoke exposure and to de-normalize smoking/vaping in our local communities.

In addition, WDGPH participates in various school and community events to share information and resources. For example, WDGPH will be presenting at the Wellington Catholic District School Boards conference for parents in May.

References

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