

Marijuana Education in a Post-Legalized Society Part 1

Molly Lotz, LCSW, Co-founder of Marijuana Education Initiative

As policy changes regarding marijuana move across the United States, we are also seeing a shift in social norms. As social norms begin to change, so too does the perception of harm. Many teens today do not think marijuana is at all harmful for them. We hear over and over, “It’s natural,” “It’s medicine,” “It’s legal, so it can’t be that bad.” The perception of harm with regard to adolescent marijuana use is concerningly low. When we talk with adolescents about today’s marijuana, it becomes apparent that teenagers are receiving a lot of misinformation and confusing mixed messages about marijuana. Adolescents today are coming of age in a world of legalized cannabis. This is a reality for today’s youth, but it is a very different reality from what many of their parents, educators and school counselors grew up in. As trusted adults, we need to meet youth at their level and at their reality. This means moving past the “Just Say No” approaches of previous generations and adopting a progressive approach to youth marijuana prevention that addresses cannabis as a legal substance (in some states) and also as a product that is sometimes used medicinally. Even for states that do not have recreational marijuana laws, the approach to youth marijuana prevention efforts remains in dire need of upgrade. It is important to arm students with the information they need to make healthy and informed decisions.

The still-developing adolescent brain differs significantly from the brain of a fully developed adult; therefore, the effects of marijuana on the adolescent brain differ greatly as well. During the adolescent years, the prefrontal cortex, the portion of your brain that sits just behind your forehead, is still forming. The prefrontal cortex trims away neural connections that are not needed and begins the process of myelination, or wrapping nerve cells in myelin. Myelin is a fatty substance that sheathes nerve fibers to increase the speed of electrical communications in the brain. Think of myelin as a kind of insulation or protective coating for nerve cells. As this protective coating starts to form in the brain, advanced thinking abilities strengthen. When I say *advanced thinking abilities*, I am talking about important executive functioning skills such as emotional control, flexible thinking, working memory, reasoning and problem solving. This protective coating is not yet formed in adolescents. Myelination in the prefrontal cortex is not completed until the early to mid 20s, so teenagers have not yet developed these advanced thinking abilities. Nerve cells that are not yet myelinated are more susceptible to damage from substances such as drugs and alcohol and therefore substance abuse can impact the development of these important areas of the brain.