

For some parents, legalization complicates how to talk about pot



Thousands cluster on the beach to smoke and relax on the final day of Hempfest, Seattle's annual gathering to advocate the decriminalization of marijuana. As recreational pot becomes more widely accepted, more parents are struggling with how to talk to their children about it. (Jordan Stead / seattlepi.com)

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Laurie Ritchie prides herself on being an open-minded parent. She voted in favor of legalizing marijuana two years ago. She started talking to her daughters about drug use around the same time. She hasn't stopped.

Now that recreational pot is legal in Colorado and Washington state for people 21 and older, "it's everywhere," the 53-year-old said. Even on her patio in this Denver suburb, where her husband sneaks an occasional smoke.

But Ritchie is aghast at the thought that her sixth-grader and her high school freshman might stumble upon their father puffing away on a joint — or worse, that he would openly smoke pot in front of them.

"I don't know why I feel like this," she said, flustered. "It's probably because [legalization] is so new. There's still some kind of a lingering stigma."

Legal recreational pot hit store shelves on Jan. 1 in Colorado and July 8 in Washington state, followed by deep family confusion. In the first year of what some describe as a grand social experiment, talking about pot and using it have never been more complicated for parents.

As soon as places like Seattle's Cannabis City and Dank Colorado in Denver began peddling bud, bong and a good buzz, "Just say no" stopped working.

Children's Hospital Colorado and Seattle Children's Hospital have seen an uptick this year in the number of children arriving at their emergency departments after accidentally ingesting marijuana. The Washington Poison Center received more calls about kids and pot in the first nine months of 2014 than it did in all of the prior year.

The University of Washington's Social Development Research Group and Seattle Children's together handed out more than 60,000 copies of "A Parent's Guide to Preventing Underage Marijuana Use" in less than six months — and that doesn't count Internet downloads.

Dr. Leslie Walker, chief of the division of adolescent medicine at Seattle Children's, can't keep up with requests for presentations on how to talk to kids about pot and its impact on the developing teen brain.

"There's a huge need, and parents are beginning to wonder, 'What do I tell my kids?'" Walker said. "We're in this funny spot. We can either be a beacon of how to do this well or an example of what not to do. I'm not sure what side we're going to be on."

Nothing better captures the new world of legalized marijuana than the snapshot taken on opening day at Cannabis City, the first of 21 retail stores planned for Seattle. The third person to buy bud there was none other than Pete Holmes, Seattle city attorney.

Voters in Alaska, Oregon and the District of Columbia face ballot measures in November about whether to legalize party pot. Advocates predict legalization could sweep the nation in the same way same-sex marriage did.

"It's so chic right now," said Kelly Kerby, a drug and alcohol intervention specialist at Eckstein Middle School in northeast Seattle. "If you're not pro-marijuana in Seattle right now, you're the enemy. There's something wrong with you."

In 2006, a community coalition was formed to battle underage drinking in the upper-middle-class neighborhood where Kerby now works. Four years later, that group of parents, school

administrators, police and healthcare providers began dealing with a jump in marijuana use by kids.

The reasons are spelled out in the state's biennial Healthy Youth Survey. Between 2006 and 2012, the percentage of Eckstein eighth-graders who said they had used pot in the previous month had more than doubled, from 4% to 10%. At nearby Roosevelt High School, pot use rose during the same period from 18% to 27% for the 10th-graders surveyed.

During that time, the city of Seattle began licensing medical marijuana dispensaries, and the campaign to legalize recreational marijuana ramped up. Now, Kerby said, the controlled substance Eckstein Middle School students are most often found with is marijuana.

"Legalization made an already bad problem worse," she said. "We're taking something and we're making it legal and that means it's OK."

Cherylynne Crowther's daughter is entering Eckstein Middle School this semester. Crowther said she began talking to her 11-year-old about smoking, drinking and sex when Athena was in first grade.

Pot conversations began two years later, when medical marijuana dispensaries began popping up and the family drove by the green-cross establishments.

"It's a challenge to explain what marijuana does and why anyone wants to do it," Crowther said. "Why would someone alter their minds?"

Crowther, a 49-year-old media consultant, also struggles with how to warn Athena about accepting treats from kids at school now that marijuana edibles are becoming available. And she wonders how she will ask other parents if they keep pot at home — and if it's locked up.

"This is all a grand experiment," Crowther said. "I just don't want my kids, or anybody's kids, to be the lab rats."

One of the most pressing concerns since legalization in Colorado has been with edible products, because of their misunderstood potency and how easily children can mistake them for regular treats.

Since stores began to open in January, 13 children — most of them toddlers — have wound up in the emergency room at Children's Hospital Colorado after accidentally ingesting marijuana.

Most cases involved edibles; seven of the 13 had to be transferred to the intensive care unit, said Dr. George Sam Wang. Some of the young patients, he said, were just a little sleepy. Others needed breathing tubes.

In April, two 10-year-olds were caught selling marijuana to classmates on the playground in Greeley, Colo. One fourth-grader sold leaf marijuana, the other a pot-laced candy bar. The two children, who were suspended, had swiped the marijuana from a grandparent's stash.

"Come on, people, secure your weed," said John Gates, the safety and security director at Greeley-Evans School District 6. He opposed legalization for fear that more contraband would wind up in the schools. "My worst fears were realized."

The question, of course, is how parents can best talk about pot and handle it in their homes. Most experts warn that marijuana, like alcohol and prescription drugs, should be locked away. They suggest that parents talk about pot early and often, rather than having a stilted, one-time conversation.

They warn parents never to lie about their own marijuana use.

Cheryl Shuman, the California-based executive director of Moms for Marijuana, an advocacy group for legalization and education, has been using medical marijuana for nearly two decades.

Not long after her daughters had taken the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program at their schools, Shuman's youngest caught her smoking on the patio. She remembers wondering whether she should try to hide it or confess. She chose confession.

"My daughter said, 'Mom, I knew you were smoking. I could smell it. I just wanted to see if you would lie to me,'" Shuman said. Now adults, neither of Shuman's daughters use marijuana.

Recently, she said, she has heard of some parents letting their older teenagers use marijuana openly.

"I would never advocate recreational use for anyone under 21," she said. Still, "we all know kids are going to try it. As a parent, if I had to choose if my child used anything — prescription drugs, marijuana, alcohol — I would feel safer if they chose marijuana."

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La Ganga reported from Seattle and special correspondent Deam from Denver.

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