

Understanding what the teens they care about are thinking can be a mystery for any parent or family member. It would be much easier if teens came with a set of instructions or were more open in their communication. In this column, I hope to provide you with a peek at some of the things your teen is likely thinking about marijuana, but might be reluctant to say.

Adult-use marijuana became a legal product in Minnesota on August 1st, 2023 for people aged 21 and older. As more states move to legalize recreational marijuana, public health officials are working to assess the effects of marijuana use among our population. Of the studies done on youth, the consensus is that marijuana use by teens is tied to a host of health risks.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), marijuana use during teen years can harm a developing teen's brain. The CDC has found that people who begin using marijuana in their teens are more likely to have lasting brain developmental effects and a higher potential of marijuana use disorder. The CDC has found that, when compared to teens who do not use marijuana, teens who use marijuana may be less likely to graduate from high school or college. In short, marijuana use by teens represents a real risk of harm.

The legalization effort surrounding adult use of marijuana has created a dangerous side effect for our youth. The effort to legalize marijuana has helped to create a false sense of safety among teens regarding the use of marijuana. Evidence for this is found in the Minnesota Student Survey. Every three years, school districts across the state participate in the Minnesota Student Survey, an information gathering survey covering a variety of topics related to the health and welfare of students. The survey results give a glimpse into the activities and attitudes of students in 5th, 8th, 9th, and 11th grades. The 2022 survey, the most recent one on record, reveals a disturbing disconnect between student perceptions and the facts concerning the risk of harm associated with marijuana use. Perception of harm is important as it serves as a protective factor that is associated with lower risk of use in teens. Additionally, the survey provides evidence that parents and caregivers can make a positive impact on the health of their teen.

The good news contained in this survey is that 94% of 9th grade Benton County students and 86% of 11th grade Benton County students report never having used marijuana. However, when the questions shift to perceptions of harm regarding marijuana, there is cause for concern of future use. Benton County students in 9th and 11th grades report a high perception of harm associated with the use of both tobacco and alcohol. When asked about the use of cigarettes, 82% of 9th grade students and 78% of 11th grade students associated daily use of cigarettes with either a moderate or great risk of harm. Similarly, when asked about the use of alcohol, 68% of 9th grade students and 61% of 11th grade students associated having 5 or more drinks per week with either a moderate or great risk of harm. Student attitudes reverse when asked about the use of marijuana. When asked about the use of marijuana, 52% of 9th grade

students and 70% of 11th grade students associated use of marijuana once or twice a week with either a slight risk or no risk of harm. In the 2013 survey, only 30% of 9th grade students and 36% of 11th grade students reported there was a slight or no risk associated with marijuana use.

The survey also asks students how their parents would feel about their use of certain substances. The results show that students are listening when parents talk about the danger of substance use. The survey consistently shows students understand parents would not approve of their use of either tobacco or alcohol. About 75% of both 9th grade students and 11th grade students believe their parents would feel it was very wrong if the student were to use either alcohol or tobacco. On the topic of marijuana, that feeling is not as strong with 11th grade students. While 72% of 9th grade students believed their parents would feel it was very wrong for them to use marijuana, that number drops to 55% for students in 11th grade. This decline is particularly troubling when compared to the 82% of 11th graders who reported in the 2013 survey believing their parents would think it was very wrong for them to use marijuana.

While I don't have an instruction manual for your teen, the survey results make clear teens are listening to their parents and that the messages parents deliver have influence on teens' attitudes and actions. It has taken years of education and messaging to help teens understand the health risks posed by alcohol and tobacco. It will likely take years of educational efforts to help teens understand the health risks posed to teens by marijuana use. Parents and caregivers will be a key part in carrying this message to teens. If you have a teen in your life, please fight your way through the drama and eyerolls and take a moment to have an awkward conversation with them about the risk marijuana use poses to their health.

For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.