WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE DRUGS?

It may be easier to help children stay away from alcohol and other drugs if you understand why young people use them. They use alcohol and other drugs for many of the same reasons adults do. Here are the most common reasons kids use drugs:

1. **Peer pressure** - Children may give in to pressures from other kids to smoke, drink or use other drugs. These pressures may be direct or indirect. They may use a drug to feel like part of a group, or to act grown-up. They assume that "everybody does it".

2. **Pleasure** - Many teenagers say they take drugs to feel good. In particular, smoking can easily become part of any get-together and alcohol a part of teenage parties.

3. **Curiosity or Experimentation** - At first, kids may be tempted to try a drug to find out for themselves what it is like. Usually people who use a drug only for this reason do not continue to use it regularly.

4. **Boredom** - If they lack activities and interests other than school, young people may want to try something new and exciting. Some children and adolescents seem to be more likely to seek sensational experiences and take risks than others.

5. **Self-esteem** - Young people, as well as adults, often use drugs to try to feel more confident about themselves. Drugs seem to make them feel more important and powerful. Tobacco is often the first drug that young teenagers use in this way.

6. **Coping with stress** - Many young people do not yet have good problem-solving skills. Some of them use drugs to help cope with problems at school, in the family, with social relationships. Often beginning with tobacco, young people may use drugs to help them relax and control anxiety.

7. **Escapism** - Drugs appear to make things better than they really are. Problems don't seem as real or important.

8. **Social culture** - Alcohol is part of our culture. Licensed restaurants assume you will want something from the bar before dinner, as do friends who invite you to their house. The message that alcohol goes hand in hand with social activities is constantly given to our children. Despite anti-smoking messages, the media continue to show popular personalities smoking, drinking and using drugs.

9. **Rebellion** - Since most adults do not approve of alcohol or drug use among children, young people may use drugs to rebel against parents or teachers.
WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT DRUGS?

It is important for you to know some basic information about drugs. Then you can help children to make good decisions about drug use.

- A “drug” is anything other than a food which is taken to change the way the body or the mind works. This includes even common medications and a drug such as caffeine which is found in everyday beverages such as coffee, tea and colas.

- The most commonly-abused drugs are “psychoactive” drugs. These are taken to change the way a person feels, thinks or acts.

- The three “psychoactive” drugs which are most commonly used by Canadian youth are: alcohol, tobacco and cannabis (marijuana, hash, hash oil).

- The effects of any drug depend on several factors:
  - the amount taken at one time
  - the user's past drug experience
  - the manner in which the drug is taken
  - the situation in which the drug is used.

- “Drug abuse” is the use of a drug which is related to a problem. It could be a problem at school, with a job, with family or friends, or with your health.

- Drug-related problems often occur because a person becomes dependent on the drug. That means the drug becomes so important to the person that he believes he cannot manage without it.
WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF DRUG USE?

Despite our best intentions, as children and adolescents follow different paths, somewhere on that path there will be problems. Sometimes these problems will include the use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs. A simple checklist of how to spot drug use cannot apply to every situation. However, you may begin to suspect that your children are using drugs if you notice that they are acting differently or if you find strange objects around the house. These changes may mean the child is using drugs or they may not. Teenagers are often very moody. However a serious change of character, and particularly extended over a period of time, may be a sign that the child is using drugs. Be careful not to jump to conclusions since many of these changes can also be signs of normal adolescence or signs of other kinds of problems.

Changes in Mood:
Your child may be:
- less caring and less involved at home
- cranky or more difficult to get along with
- moody
- secretive and uncooperative
- withdrawn, depressed

Physical Changes:
Your child may:
- lose weight
- get red eyes
- have trouble talking or walking
- have difficulty sleeping or sleep long hours into the morning

Changes in Behaviour:
Your child may:
- skip classes at school
- get increasingly poorer grades
- need more money (you may notice money is missing) or become aggressive about asking for money
- lose her job
- change friends, and not be willing to bring them home or talk about them
- have trouble concentrating and paying attention
- spend more time in his room or away from home
- change interests and hobbies
- receive late night calls or other phone calls from people you don't know

These objects may be used by your child to take drugs or to cover up the use of drugs:

Objects/Equipment used to take drugs:
- cigarette papers - (for rolling joints)
- roach clips - (for smoking joints)
- hash pipes - (for smoking hash)
- glass water pipes - (for smoking hash or crack)
- syringes - (for injecting drugs)
- vial - (for hash oil)
- small scales - (for weighing drugs)
- pills, powder, other substances that you can't identify
- pop bottles with holes in the bottom
- pop cans with punched holes
- scorched knives

Objects/Equipment used to cover up drug use:
- eye drops (to reduce blood-shot eyes caused by smoking marijuana)
- mouth wash (to cover up breath odours)
- incense (to cover up smell of smoking drugs, such as marijuana, hash in house).
IF YOU SUSPECT DRUG USE... 

If you are concerned that your child has been using alcohol or another drug, be open and honest about your feelings. It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed by confusion, guilt, anger or fear. Try not to let your feelings get in the way. Cool down before thinking about the best way to respond. Don’t confront your child when either one of you is “high” or drunk.

Choose the right time:
Try to talk privately with your child during a quiet part of the day when you won’t be interrupted.

Focus on the behaviours:
Begin by telling your child that something is on your mind which concerns you. Mention your specific concerns (e.g. changes in behaviour or objects noted above in section 5). Name calling, scolding, blaming and threatening can create bad feelings. When a serious problem arises, it is important to try to continue respecting each other.

Don’t be afraid to set standards and follow through:
Take a firm stand regarding the use of alcohol and other drugs. Often our children wish that we would say “NO” clearly and firmly. Set rules in your home and follow through with the consequences.

For the time being, don’t ask “why”:
If your child admits to using drugs, it will not help to ask why. It is very possible that your child does not know; they may have many reasons. If your child does not admit to drug use, don't push the issue for now. By having this discussion, you have already let the child know that you are concerned and that you are willing to talk about drugs. However, you can use this time to make sure your values and the house rules are well known.

Ask for help:
Don't be afraid to get outside help. There are many confidential resources available to parents.

If you continue to notice signs which bother you, you may have to confront your child with your concerns and be persistent in finding a solution to this problem. Let your child know that you are doing this because you do care.

What to do if your son/daughter comes home drunk or stoned --

What to do That Night

**DO** Try to remain cool and calm.

**DO** Talk to them and try to find out what they have taken.

**DO** Call a doctor or take them to the nearest hospital emergency department if they are seriously ill.

**DO** Tell them, “We will talk about this tomorrow”.

**DO** Check them often during the night if they are in a condition to be sent to bed.

**DO NOT** Shout at, accuse or hurt them in any way. All this is quite useless and harmful when they are in this condition.

What to do the Next Day

**DO** Talk to them immediately.

**DO** Have them assume responsibility for their actions including clean-up.

**DO** Try to find out what happened and who they were with.

**DO** Let them know you will not accept their behaviour and you will be watching them closely in the future.

**DO** Set up guidelines for behaviour with your child as well as curfews for going out with friends. Let them know you expect them to follow these guidelines.

**DO** Talk with them about other activities and choices, so they can avoid taking drugs.

**DO NOT** Have your discussion with them if you are too angry to talk about it without losing your temper. Wait until you can discuss it calmly. No one gains anything from angry words.

**DO NOT** Try to hide what happened from other family members. Everyone in the family should be aware of what is going on, especially when support and understanding can mean so much.
WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP PREVENT DRUG PROBLEMS?

As a parent, you've probably worried about the problems your son or daughter may face with alcohol and other drugs. Even when children are very young there are many opportunities to influence their attitudes towards drugs.

The early adolescent and teenage years are a particularly confusing and important time. At this time young people need the kind of experience and learning that will give them a sense of confidence, and direction. Teenagers must come to rely on their own skills and judgment to make life work well for them.

Parents can help support these learning experiences. Here are some practical suggestions you may find helpful.

1. Always remember you are important to your children. They care about what you say and do, even though it may not seem like it at times.

2. Set guidelines for your children's behaviour and renegotiate these with them as they mature.

3. Help your children gain the feeling of confidence, control and capability that comes from learning through experience. Be positive and support their accomplishments -- both big and small.
   - Do a variety of things with them.
   - Encourage them to be self-reliant and to choose challenges that are neither too difficult nor too easy.
   - Allow them to learn from mistakes and to accept the consequences for their own decisions.
   - Help them reflect on how their decisions worked and how they can apply what they learned to new situations.

4. Realize that friendships are very important to children and teens today. Get to know your child's friends and their families, if possible. Encourage your children to bring their friends home and make an effort to emphasize the good points of all their friends.

5. Understand that children need to express themselves and their growing independence and are very concerned about their appearance and their image. Work out with them the amount of freedom that they can have in choosing clothes, hairstyles, music and activities.

6. Be an active learner yourself. Share your challenges, mistakes and feelings in an open and honest way.

There are other important ways that you can specifically work with your child to prevent alcohol or other drug problems.

1. Know as much as you can. Learn the facts about alcohol and other drugs. Then you can help your children to understand and make good decisions about drug use. Even when children are very young you can teach them about the safe use of medications.

2. Be open to your children's concerns. Encourage them to discuss alcohol and other drugs openly with you. Take advantage of television shows and advertisements to discuss how medicines, alcohol and other drugs are promoted.

3. Recognize that your children are likely to encounter some drug use among their peers, especially drinking and smoking. Ask general, non-threatening questions about their classmates and friends but don't appear shocked or angry if they say they know some kids who have tried smoking or drinking. Ask them how they felt about this and what they would do if someone asked them to try a cigarette or a drink.

4. Make sure your children know what your standards are regarding their use of alcohol (for example, no drinking under the legal age, no drinking outside of family celebrations.) Let them know you do not approve of the use of illegal drugs.

5. Ask your children to let you know where they are, and let them know where you are.

6. Show your teens how they can be responsible hosts when giving a party:
   - do not allow party crashers, drugs, or illegal alcohol use (e.g.: drinking under age:)
   - limit the party to a specific area of your house;
   - don't allow guests to come and go;
   - make sure a parent or another adult is present in the house.

7. Remember that actions speak louder than words. Be a good role model for your children to follow. Demonstrate responsible, healthy decisions with your own use of medications. If you drink, teach your children how alcohol can be used in a safe way; do not drink daily, or drink to drunkenness; do not drink and drive or mix drinking with other dangerous activities.
**ALCOHOL**

Alcohol is the most popular drug for youth as well as adults. Although many people think of alcohol as a "pick-me-up", it is in fact a "depressant" and slows down the activity of the central nervous system. The effects of alcohol can be very serious. When alcohol is used heavily on a regular basis, or when it is consumed in large amounts, particularly by a young person, it can lead to serious physical risks. Even over a short period of time, drinking can be very dangerous - for example, when it is combined with other activities such as driving. The effects of alcohol are also increased when drinking is mixed with other drugs such as sleeping pills, tranquilizers and some cold remedies.

**Short-term Health Effects of Drinking Alcohol:**
- at first, the person feels more relaxed and less inhibited
- the person will not be able to think as clearly and judgment and decision-making will be affected
- then the person's reflexes will become slower, he will have trouble working and doing things which require any physical coordination
- the person's mood may change, he may become angry or take more risks
- if the person drinks a large amount of alcohol very rapidly, the breathing system may slow down seriously or even stop, causing death
- the effects of alcohol may increase if combined with certain other drugs (e.g. sleeping pills, cold medicines)

**Long-term Health Effects of Drinking Alcohol:**
- a person who drinks heavily on a regular basis may develop:
- inflamed stomach or pancreas
- cirrhosis of the liver
- certain cancers of the gastro-intestinal tract
- heart disease
- brain and nerve damage
- in men, especially, the production of sex hormones will decrease
- stopping drinking after regular, heavy use can result in convulsions or "shakes"
CANNABIS
(Marijuana, Hashish, Hash Oil)

Cannabis is the third most popular drug used by youth. Marijuana, hashish and hash oil are all from the cannabis plant. The active drug in cannabis is THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol). It is more concentrated in hash and particularly hash oil than in marijuana. As with any illicit drug, the exact dosage of the drug can vary. The tar content of cannabis smoke is much higher than that of tobacco.

Like alcohol, the short term effects of using cannabis can be very serious if it is used in combination with other activities such as driving. Since chemical compounds from marijuana stays in the body much longer than alcohol does, it may interfere with such activities and affect memory and learning for a longer period of time.

Methods of Use:
Marijuana comes from the dried tops, leaves, stems and seeds of the plant and somewhat resembles the herb oregano. It is smoked in pipes or in hand-rolled cigarettes, called "joints".

Hashish is a dried, caked resinous substance, found as soft or hard chunks which range in colour from "blonde" to black. It is usually mixed with tobacco and smoked in pipes or joints.

Hash oil is an oily extract, usually stored in small glass containers called vials.

Short-term Effects of Using Cannabis:
- the person will get a "high" feeling, often become more relaxed and talkative, and less concerned about what he does or says
- the person's pulse rate, heart beat and blood pressure will rise
- his eyes may get red
- after a while, the person will become quiet and sleepy
- if the person is drinking or using other drugs as well as cannabis, he will not be able to think clearly and his behaviour may change
- short-term memory, concentration and ability to think clearly will be impaired
- with larger doses, the person may feel that sounds and colours are sharper or distorted; his thinking may become slow and confused
- if a very large dose is taken, the person may become confused, restless, excited; he may start seeing things and become anxious or panicky

Long-term Effects of Using Cannabis:
- regular, heavy use of cannabis will make the person dependent on the drug
- the person may lose interest in activities, his ability to learn may be affected
- he may also get infections more easily because of harm to the immune system
- the person may develop chronic bronchitis and other lung diseases
- the person's level of sex hormones may decrease

Street Names:
- pot, ragweed, dope, ace, Colombian, Mary Jane, spliff, hemp, weed, Thai sticks, ganja, "J" or jay, B.T., grass, reefer, bhang, Acapulco Gold, doobie, sinse, hash, hydro, skunk
- "roach" is the remainder of the cigarette
- "roach clip" is any device which holds the end of the cigarette
**HEROIN**

Heroin is processed from morphine, a natural substance that is taken from the seed pod of the Asian poppy plant. It usually appears as a white or brown powder.

Heroin abuse has been associated with the use of needles and, therefore, such serious health conditions as fatal overdoses, collapsed veins and infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis. An overdose can cause death.

Recently there has been a shift from injecting heroin to smoking or snorting (sniffing it through the nose). All forms of using the drug can result in physical dependence.

**Short-term Effects:**
- the person may feel a surge of intense pleasure ("euphoria")
- the person may feel a warm flushing of the skin, a dry mouth and heaviness in their limbs
- the person then may experience a drowsy state and clouded mental functioning

**Long-term Effects:**
- after repeated and long term use, the person may develop collapsed veins (from injections) or a nasal soreness (from snorting)
- the person may develop heart valve infections or liver disease

**Street Names:**
- smack, “H”, skag, junk
**COCAINE (INCLUDING CRACK)**

Cocaine is a powerful central nervous system stimulant.

Crack or rock is cocaine which is chemically changed so it can be smoked and inhaled into the lungs. Crack is highly addictive and very dangerous. People are attracted to it because smoking provides a much quicker and more intense “high” than sniffing or “snorting” cocaine into the nostrils. The sudden rush puts the brain, heart, blood vessels, and other organs at serious risk of damage.

The immediate, intense euphoria of smoking crack cocaine wears off more quickly than when the drug is sniffed. Then the user becomes anxious, irritable and deeply depressed and craves another dose to relieve the depression.

**Methods of Use:**
- snorting the powder into the nose
- injection
- smoking in the form of crack or rock

**Short-term Effects:**
- the person’s appetite will decrease
- the person will have more energy and will not get tired easily
- the person will be more alert
- his breathing will speed up
- his heart rate and blood pressure will increase and he will be at greater risk of burst blood vessels or heart failure
- the person’s pupils will be enlarged

**With Larger Doses:**
- sometimes the person will act bizarre and may be violent
- the person may experience paranoid psychosis (disappears if drug use is discontinued)
- sometimes the person feels like something is crawling under the skin
- there is risk of convulsions, coma

**Long-term Effects:**
- if the cocaine is sniffed, the nose tissues will be damaged
- the person may be undernourished
- the person may get infections more easily

**Street Names:**
- “C”, coke, flake, snow, stardust, blow, nose candy
**LSD**

LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) is a powerful drug that radically changes a person's mental state by distorting how they perceive reality. Even in very tiny doses, LSD can lead to hallucinations - making someone see or hear things that don't actually exist. Therefore, L.S.D. is called a hallucinogen.

LSD is a white, odorless, crystalline powder made in illegal laboratories. The pure drug is almost invisible. To be sold on the streets it is packaged in tablets, capsules, gelatin sheets or pieces of blotting paper, often with cartoon drawings on them. It is usually taken by mouth.

**Short term Effects:**
- the person may feel numb, weak muscled; pupils are dilated
- the person’s blood pressure, heart rate and temperature will increase
- the person's motor skills and coordination are impaired
- the person’s perception of time and distance is greatly changed
- the person may experience fear, anxiety or depression or even severe panic and may require medical attention or supervision

**Long-term Effects:**
- regular, long term use may result in depression and anxiety
- the person may experience “flash backs” of the L.S.D. experience without actually using the drug

**Street Names:**
- acid, blotter, cid, microdot, windowpane

**Other Hallucinogens:**
- "Magic Mushrooms" contain psilocybin. They come in the form of dried mushrooms or powder in capsules.
- *Mescaline* is prepared from "buttons" of the peyote cactus, which are chopped or ground and sold in capsules.
- *MDA* is a white to light-brown powder or sometimes an amber liquid that is ordinarily swallowed.
- *PCP* comes in the form of a white or colored crystal or powder or tablet. It is usually mixed with tobacco or marijuana and smoked. Effects can last as long as two weeks. Users can become violent.
OTHER DRUGS

There are a number of other drugs which most young people do not use but they are still of concern because they have increased somewhat in popularity over the last few years.

STEROIDS
The most common are the “anabolic steroids” which are a chemically made form of the male sex hormone, testosterone.

Short-term Effects
- the person may become aggressive, edgy, impatient and paranoid
- the person may experience mood swings
- the person may experience headaches, nosebleeds, stomach aches, acne, increased blood pressure and heart beat

Long-term Effects
- females may become more masculine looking, including body hair; some have been unable to bear children
- males may experience breast development, decrease in the size of their testicles and sperm count
- long and heavy use of steroids can cause irreversible liver damage and hardening of the arteries that may end in a heart attack or stroke.

SOLVENTS, GLUE AND OTHER INHALANTS
The use of glue and other solvents tends to be popular with pre-teens than older youth, perhaps because they are easily available. They include nail polish remover, lighter fluid, cleaning fluids, paint thinner, gasoline, and model airplane cement. The users inhale fumes by holding a bag or cloth containing the substance over the face.

Short-term Effects
- the person may experience a euphoric feeling, lightheadedness, exhilaration and vivid fantasies
- the person may experience nausea, drooling, sneezing, and coughing, poor muscular control

Long-term Effects
- the person may experience thirst, weight loss, nosebleeds, fatigue
- he may experience feelings of hostility and feelings of persecution
- with some substances there are signs of brain damage
- “Sudden sniffing death” can follow strenuous exercise or undue stress after the person has inhaled deeply, caused by heart failure. Death by suffocation has occurred after users have become unconscious with a plastic bag over nose and mouth.
**RAVES**

“Raves” are large dance parties often held in old warehouses or large outdoor locations. Often, the exact location of the rave is unknown or secretive — participants meet at a designated spot and are then transported to the location of the rave party. The distinctive “techno” music and all night dancing have resulted in a “rave” culture associated with clothing styles and items such as baby toys. A recent study of raving in Toronto reported that a wide variety of drugs were available and/or used at raves (with the exception of alcohol, crack cocaine and intravenous drugs). In fact, the most frequently used drug was cannabis. Other drugs available include ecstasy, methamphetamine, GHB (gamma hydroxy butyrate), ketamine, LSD and psilocybin.
SEXUAL ASSAULT AND DRUG MISUSE

A number of other drugs have gained attention recently because of their potential for abuse as “date rape drugs”. People have been unknowingly given a drug which makes them less able to resist sexual assault. When mixed with alcohol or other drugs the effects of these drugs are increased and can be fatal.

**Rohypnol** is the manufacturer’s trade name for a drug that belongs to the same family of sedative drugs that includes drugs such as Valium (trade name). It is not approved for use in Canada or the USA.

**Short-term Effects**
- the person may experience lack of memory, impaired judgment, dizziness, and periods of blackout
- sedation begins in about 30 minutes, peaks within 2 hours and lasts for about 8 hours

**Street names:** rophies, ruffies, roofies

**GHB (gamma hydroxy butyrate)** has surfaced as a drug at rave parties and also has been found in cases of sexual assault. It is an illegally manufactured drug mostly prepared as an odourless and tasteless liquid. It is quickly absorbed in the body and peaks in 20-60 minutes.

**Short-term Effects**
- the person may experience dizziness, nausea, vomiting, drowsiness, amnesia and vertigo
- the person may then experience loss of consciousness, seizures, depressed breathing and coma

**Street names:** Liquid Ecstasy, Liquid X

**Ketamine** is also a drug that is available at raves and has been reported in cases of sexual assault. It is a relative of PCP and has been used as an anesthetic in medical and veterinary practice. The drug is found in the form of capsules, powder, crystals and solutions.

**Short-term Effects**
- person may experience temporary amnesia and hallucinations

**Street names:** Special K, baby food
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Questions Parents Ask

Q. So many teenagers have begun to drink at parties by the middle of high school. How can I prevent my son or daughter from joining in?

A. We do know that underage drinking, especially in the older teenage years, is still the norm, although a growing number of students are choosing not to drink at all. Parents can give a clear message to their teenagers about drinking ("I don't want you to drink at this stage of your life because it puts your personal safety at risk") and have a surprising amount of influence. Discuss with your son or daughter what choices they have when they find themselves in a situation where some of their friends may be drinking.

Q. What are the dangers of teenage drinking, as long as my son or daughter doesn’t drink and drive?

A. There are many dangers associated drinking during the teenage years. Even with just a few drinks, alcohol begins to affect judgment. Drinkers then may make decisions that put their own and others health and safety at risk. Teenagers themselves readily admit that when they drink they behave in ways they later regret. This can range from "acting stupid" to saying something rude to a friend or getting involved sexually. Fights, damage to property, injuries, unwanted pregnancy, S.T.D.'s (sexually transmitted diseases), trying other drugs and riding with an impaired driver are all harmful consequences of teenage drinking. Even for young drivers who have not been drinking themselves (as "the designated driver"), having drunk passengers can seriously affect their ability to drive safely.

Sometimes party drinking takes the form of "chugging" or "funneling" -- power drinking or "quarters" contests where young people drink as much as they can as quickly as they can. This is particularly risky, because drinking in this manner can cause severe intoxication leading to stoppage of breathing and even death. Death can also occur when a person becomes unconscious and chokes on his own vomit.

Q. Isn’t it better if my teenager drinks in my home, so he doesn’t feel it’s something to “get away with”?

A. Many parents do feel that if alcohol is not made to be the "forbidden fruit", it will lose some of its attraction for a teenager. In fact, most young people are introduced to drinking in their own homes. However, there is a clear difference between the underage (but legal) drinking in a family situation (such as at times of celebration or on a religious holiday) and the kind of drinking that underage teenagers do with their friends. This kind of party drinking tends to be unrestrained and is in fact, illegal. Having a parent present in the home when there is a teenage drinking party does not prevent the harmful or legal consequences of underage drinking. In fact, a parent who allows such an event is responsible, under the law, for the consequences of alcohol-related problems until all persons are no longer impaired.

Q. I grew up in a time where it seemed “everyone” was smoking marijuana. I tried some too. What do I tell my children about that?

A. This is a tough question. Like any other question, the answer should be geared to the child who is asking it. You may wish to wait until your child is older or asks you directly before you intend to deal with it. There is no one way to answer. If you can, be honest but it is not necessary to go into detail. Your answer should include a message about why you stopped. Emphasize why, if you were making the decision again today, you feel you would do so differently.

A parent who continues to use this drug will be in a very difficult position. Research has shown that children of parents who continue to use marijuana are at a much higher risk for using this drug themselves.

Q. Is the marijuana available today different than the marijuana of the 60's and 70's?

A. The strength of marijuana has increased. Today different varieties of marijuana are being grown across North America, some indoors, or "hydroponically". Using up-to-date growing techniques, marijuana growers are able to cross-cultivate different varieties to create new and unique types of marijuana.

Q. Is marijuana less harmful than tobacco or alcohol?

A. The harmful effects of tobacco use and alcohol abuse on individuals and society are well-known. For example, we know that tobacco is the leading cause of preventable deaths in Canada. And we are aware that domestic violence is closely linked to alcohol abuse. Marijuana is not in these two categories.

Marijuana does share some harmful health effects in common with tobacco, such as the cancer-causing agents and damage to the breathing system. Marijuana also has similar harmful effects as alcohol, such as impaired judgment, coordination and concentration. Marijuana use also poses risks to workplace and traffic safety similar to alcohol.

Evidence is beginning to show that long-term marijuana use poses a risk for memory and selective attention that nicotine or moderate daily drinking is not associated with.

Q. What is “harm reduction” and is this an approach I should take with my child?
Questions Kids Ask

Q. What’s the difference if I start to drink now or I wait until I’m 19 - it’s only three years difference?

A. Those are very important three years - the later you start drinking, the less likely you are to develop drinking problems later on. These teenage years may seem confusing and awkward, and it may look to you as if having a drink or two will help you to relax with your friends and have more fun - certainly that’s the way it looks on T.V.! But this is an important time for you to develop your own style, and your own sense of confidence without relying on help from a bottle.

Q. What’s the big deal, Mom! I only drink beer.

A. This is a common misunderstanding. Quite a few people think that beer is not as harmful as other forms of alcohol. But one beer has the same amount of alcohol in it as a drink of liquor or a glass of wine. I am concerned about you and would like to talk to you about why you drink, even if it’s “only” beer.

Q. I don’t drink every day so what’s the problem?

A. Many people think that they won’t have problems with alcohol because they only drink on weekends. But unfortunately this is not always true. And many young people who limit their drinking to the weekend tend to “binge” or drink a lot at that time. I just need to watch the news or read the paper and I see the number of drivers and passengers killed or seriously injured by drinking drivers every weekend. I don’t want this to happen to you. I care about you and I want you to enjoy this time in your life without drinking.

Q. Wouldn’t you rather I drink than take drugs?

A. I would rather you did not use any drug, including alcohol. Alcohol is a drug. Drinking can lead to serious problems, especially if you start when you’re young. If you choose to drink when you are legally of age, I hope you will do so responsibly.

Q. I don’t take drugs, I just smoke cigarettes.

A. I’m concerned about smoking as well as other drugs. Cigarettes contain the drug nicotine and other deadly poisons. Tobacco is the number one cause of preventable deaths in North America. I care about your health now and in the future.

Q. You smoke, so why shouldn’t I?

A. I don’t want to smoke, but I made the mistake of trying cigarettes when I was young. I now realize that tobacco is one of the most addictive drugs. The easiest way to quit is not to start.

Q. You drink, so why can’t I use marijuana?

A. As an adult, I have made my own decision to drink responsibly, I know in the end, you will make your own decision about marijuana use. But we do not approve of using marijuana for several reasons. First of all, marijuana can affect your health. Marijuana affects short term memory, judgment, co-ordination and driving skills. Furthermore, the smoke from one joint contains much more “tar” than a regular cigarette, so with regular use, the risk of lung diseases increases. As with any street drug, nobody can be sure exactly what is contained in a joint or how potent the drug might be. My second concern is that marijuana is illegal. Even if you are caught with only one joint you could be charged. If you are convicted you will have a criminal record. Think about how that would affect you, now and later on in life and the consequences for work or travel outside Canada.

Q. Everyone uses marijuana. I don’t see why I can’t use it too.

A. Actually that’s not true. Most young people or adults do not use marijuana or other illegal drugs. Part of growing up is learning to make decisions on your own -- not just following along with your friends. Sometimes being different and not going along with the group sets you apart and shows that you are more grown up than they are. A friend will and should respect you and your decisions about not using drugs.

Q. Marijuana is a natural substance used to make paper, and clothes and has important medical uses, so it can’t be that harmful.

A. The marijuana that people use to get “high” today is very different to the hemp that is used to make fiber and other products. Many drugs do originally come from plants growing in nature. But we know that plants growing wild can be dangerous; some can be so poisonous they are deadly. Most drugs which come from plants are changed by a chemical process in some way (like cocaine or heroin) or carefully grown using specific growing techniques, like marijuana or tobacco, to produce exactly what the grower wants. Not much is left to chance!
Many drugs, whether originally from a plant or whether produced only in labs, can have some positive helpful benefits in the right situations. Morphine which, like heroin, is from the Asian poppy plant, is a good example of this.

Because marijuana is a very complicated substance (it has more than 350 chemical compounds) it would be surprising if some did not turn out to have some medical use someday. But before any drug is found medically acceptable, it has to pass strict tests.

Scientific tests have not yet proved that marijuana is as useful in treating epilepsy or glaucoma or controlling seizures as other drugs. Most doctors do not recommend marijuana for controlling nausea for seriously ill patients with AIDS and those undergoing cancer treatments. But some of these patients have found marijuana helpful and a pill, ("dronabinol", which is the THC produced in labs) has passed clinical tests. Scientists are continuing to try to isolate some of the chemicals in marijuana to see if they can find possible medical benefits and more research needs to be done.

But there are so many personal and health risks associated with smoking marijuana that, even if someday a medical benefit is discovered, I don't think it's a drug to be used casually.
A. Harm reduction is the approach that we should try to reduce the problems and harms that can happen when a person is using drugs. Examples of this approach would be giving heroin addicts clean needles to decrease their risks of contacting HIV/AIDS or hepatitis and advising those who attend “raves” to keep drinking lots of water to avoid becoming dehydrated.

Many parents who advise their children against smoking, drinking and use of any drug, will add, as their bottom line, that if their son or daughter does happen to drink or use drugs, they can call their parents to ensure they have a safe way home.

In another example of harm reduction, parents who do not want their children to use alcohol can still warn their son or daughter to never leave their drink (alcoholic or non-alcoholic) unattended in a social setting or take a drink from anyone other than someone they know and trust or a restaurant or bar server, in order to prevent a drug from being slipped into their drink. Particularly as teens grow older and parents realize that a son or daughter has begun to drink, parents can caution them to increase their personal safety by having a sober ‘buddy’ around and drinking less and on fewer occasions.

Parents can also make sure that their teenage and young adult children have all the facts about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs so that when their sons and daughters do make their own choices about drug use, they will take precautions to decrease the problems that smoking, drinking or drug use can bring.

In giving these “harm reduction” messages parents can continue to emphasize to their children that the most certain way to protect their personal safety is to not drink or use any drugs at all.