

FACT SHEET #1

Cannabis and Youth Project



Effective Strategies for Working with Youth

Need for Effective Messages and Accurate Information

The pending legislation, the recent changes in the application of the existing laws governing cannabis use, and the approval of medical use of marijuana have all created much interest and confusion surrounding this substance.

School officials have felt unable to address the use of marijuana in their school environments and many Canadians have misunderstood the intent and application of the proposed reforms believing that decriminalization will in fact make use of cannabis legal.

As a result, it is a good time to address concerns and work in communities to provide accurate and balanced information. Recent experience with this issue and feedback from young people confirm the following:

- Need for clear, thoughtful, straightforward, and factual information
- Preference for visuals, graphics, or pictures to highlight the message
- Preference for succinct positive statements rather than the negative or fear based messages
- Need for information that lends itself to making informed choices and decisions regarding the risks of use of cannabis.

Messages for Youth

Examples of some of the messages that were received favourably include the following:

- Toking is still smoking...your lungs don't know the difference
- Marijuana is not a performance enhancing drug
- Do you have to or do you want to?
- Do you remember what you did today?
- Where will your use take you?
- Good friends don't let friends toké and drive.

Information that is being sought by young people generally falls into the broad categories of information about health risks, the effects of cannabis use, legal status and definitions, and issues related to personal choice and peer influences.

Building on Experience with Drug Education

Young people have been exposed to well developed public education strategies pertaining to alcohol and tobacco use and as a result are very well informed with regard to the dangers of use of these substances. It appears that messages and information that build on this understanding of risks are readily received and accepted.

For example, identifying that there are carcinogenic chemicals contained in the smoke from cannabis is easily recognized as a risk and is transferable from the learning related to tobacco use. Similarly, identifying that there are significant risks associated with use of cannabis and driving and even more significantly with the use of both cannabis and alcohol builds on education campaigns addressing drinking and driving.

However, of interest is the finding that many young people react with concern that the harms related to tobacco and alcohol use are in fact more severe than the harms related to cannabis and yet these substances are legal. This has led to interesting challenges, questions, and discussion. When involved in work with a young audience it is important to be prepared to address this issue.

Canada's Renewed Drug Strategy

The federal government is attempting to reform legislation dealing with cannabis as well as to develop strategies to educate the public and reduce harm.

Health Canada is currently involved in the development of public education materials including a web site directed to youth as part of the Renewed Drug Strategy. Combining cannabis reform with public education to discourage use of marijuana is seen as the way to reinforce the message that marijuana is illegal and potentially harmful.

Health Canada: "Preventing Substance Use Problems Among Young People: A Compendium of Best Practices" 2001 is available on the Health Canada web site www.hc-sc.gc.ca.

The Department of Justice provides a web page titled "FAQs for Youth on Cannabis Law Reforms." This serves to provide practical and straightforward information as to how the legislation will be applied to young people.

Additional Recommendations and Resources:

Various addiction organizations across Canada are collaborating to address the decriminalization of cannabis and are in the process of developing public education campaigns and materials. Health Canada, CAMH, Addiction Foundation of Manitoba and representatives from other provinces have been working together to develop strategies and resources.

Key points to consider when mounting public education activities are outlined in the CAMH Youth Scoops Sheet #1 titled "Programs That Work with Youth: Is there a secret formula?" This resource is available on the CAMH web site.

The pamphlet "About Marijuana" has been revised and is available on the CAMH web site or in hard copy for public distribution.

CAMH Position Re: Youth and Harm Reduction Strategies as Guiding Principles

"We have seen that a prohibitionist response does not work for adolescents who have a developmental need to take risks, assert their autonomy, develop values independent of their parents and other authorities, find acceptance in a peer group, seek excitement and satisfy their curiosity.

Taking a pragmatic approach to this generally understood phenomenon, harm reduction avoids taking a uniform stance that substance is bad, but instead focuses on getting accurate and unbiased information on the harm of use to potential users, in order to help them make informed decisions about whether to use, and if they choose to use, what precautions to take to minimize their risk. Young people do not trust authorities they believe provide misleading information on substance use and its dangers when it contradicts their own experience or those of their peers." Excerpt from: CAMH, submission on Harm Reduction.