As I wrote last month, marijuana and its use has changed. The laws around it are in flux. As of now, marijuana for medical usage is legal in 23 states and the District of Columbia; two of those states, Colorado and Washington, have legalized recreational use as well (for people 21 and over). The stuff itself, usually green, leafy and intended for smoking, is increasingly available in a form that I have also written about before: It may be a drug, but it can look like candy.

So how, I asked, do we talk about the maybe-legal-for-some-people-in-some-contexts-but-not-for-you drug that can now be munched, smoked or sipped?

As Julie Scelfo described in A Family’s Truth About Marijuana Depends on the Family, parents are finding different answers to this question, up to and including smoking with teenagers and helping teens 18 and over to secure marijuana legally with medical marijuana cards. A parent who is or has been a user of marijuana may see it differently than a parent who has not. Just as some parents have always preferred to take a more lenient stance on alcohol use, or even the law, than others, some parents will be similarly lenient regarding marijuana.

But there remain excellent reasons for taking the classic ’80s “Just-Say-No” approach to marijuana use in teenagers. While the legalization of marijuana for adults or for medical use in some states contributes to a
perception that it is safe for all, its effects on developing brains are less clear. Recent research has found a correlation between regular marijuana use at younger ages and impaired neural connectivity, executive function and memory, and poor grades and school performance, although the question of causation is particularly murky in this area: Teens who are already struggling with brain function or school performance may be more likely to embrace marijuana use. Colorado’s “Don’t Be a Lab Rat” campaign tackles the lack of clarity head on, asking “Who’s going to risk their brains to find out once and for all what marijuana really does?”

Beyond the possible neural changes, marijuana use can have big consequences in a teen’s life. It’s still illegal in every state for teenagers to use marijuana. Many high school sports and organized activities take a strict no-tolerance view of marijuana (and alcohol). Students who even attend a party where the drug is used may find themselves off the team or out of the band. (College sports teams, including those at the University of Colorado Boulder, often take a similar approach.)

If your teenager isn’t a joiner, he may be a traveler. A marijuana conviction, even a minor one, can mean no visa to countries from Canada to China. Marijuana use, even without a conviction, can end job prospects with the military, police and fire departments, or the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and disqualify a student from government internships. Many jobs and even colleges and graduate schools take past drug use (or evidence of it through, perhaps, social media) seriously. Your teenager (or any proponent of legalization) can argue that those limits are shortsighted and should change, but for now, those are the facts. The choice to use marijuana now can limit later life choices.

This conversation is also a different one for parents of minority children. Statistically, white teenagers can hope that police and other authorities will look the other way when it comes to marijuana use; black teenagers, in particular, often cannot. Blacks are routinely singled out for marijuana arrests.
Minorities are more likely to suffer any possible consequences for its use, and
it use can become a pretext for more and harsher police scrutiny of a teen.

All that said, Children’s Hospital Colorado reminds parents to “have
conversations, not lectures.” Children make choices all the time that wouldn’t
be our choices for them, and families regroup, and move forward. Listen to
your child’s perspective; make sure you’re having an ongoing conversation
around marijuana, ask questions, and above all, make sure your child knows
that if he feels unsafe at any moment, he can call.

As the laws around marijuana use change, and with them the ways we
consider drug use in the larger culture, that conversation with teenagers will
change as well. Parents will also find themselves talking about the ways
different families approach marijuana use (you might not share a pipe with
your son; his best friend’s father may feel differently). We’ll face new
conversations with each other about what’s appropriate. Few of us would ask a
fellow parent not to drink a beer in the presence of our children; we may feel
differently about that pipe, and differently still about a serving of THC-laced
chocolate, medical or recreational.

Like the conversations we’re having with our kids, this one will continue.
What do you say to your teens about marijuana, about your own history with
marijuana, or about their own potential use?

Read more about marijuana on Motherlode: When Marijuana Looks
Like Candy, Not Drugs; What to Do When Your Child Wants Marijuana
Stocks, and That Six-Serving Bar of Marijuana Chocolate? My Son Ate It.

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