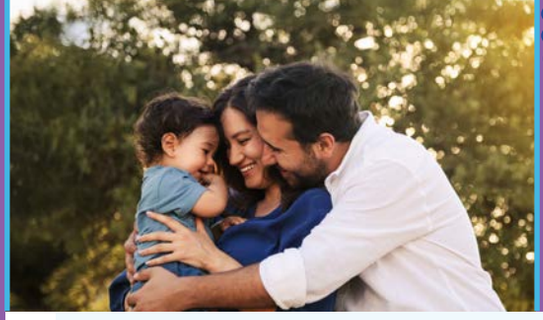

Marijuana & Child Safety

Fact Sheet for Professional Development

Parenting requires sustained attention, judgment, emotional connection, and quick response in emergencies. Marijuana use impairs many of these essential functions. Unlike alcohol, THC lingers in the body for hours or days, meaning impairment may persist long after use.[1]

With legalization expanding, many assume marijuana is safe; however, legality does not equal safety. Professionals play a critical role in helping families understand how marijuana use can compromise parenting, endanger child safety, and affect child development.

Immediate Caregiving Risks

Impaired Response & Judgment

- Marijuana affects memory, attention, mood, motor coordination, and decision-making.[2] Parents who use may be slower to anticipate hazards or respond in emergencies, increasing accidental injury risk.[3] Marijuana use is also linked with anxiety, psychosis, and hallucinations, with risks heightened by poverty, stress, or mental health issues.[2,3]

Sleep & Nighttime Care

- Marijuana disrupts healthy sleep cycles, reducing alertness, patience, and responsiveness.[4] Regular use quickly builds tolerance, often leading to heavier use that further reduces sleep quality (less deep sleep).[4] Marijuana withdrawal commonly causes insomnia, delayed sleep onset, and frequent awakenings.[4] These patterns undermine consistent caregiving and increase nighttime safety risks, particularly when parents co-sleep with infants or need to wake quickly to respond to a child's needs.[4,5] Parents who use and co-sleep increase the risk of infant suffocation.[5]
- Cannabidiol (CBD), another component of marijuana, has unpredictable effects and is not established as a safe sleep aid.[4]

Driving Dangers

- Marijuana impairs driving by slowing reaction time and coordination.[1] In 2024, about 11.7 million Americans drove under the influence of marijuana.[6] It is the most common illicit drug detected in crash-involved drivers, including fatal crashes, and using it doubles crash risk.[2] Driving should be avoided for at least 6-8 hours after smoking and 8-12 hours after consuming edibles.[1]

Environmental & Accidental Exposure Risks

Products & Potency

- Marijuana products vary widely in form and potency: flower, vapes, edibles, concentrates, drinks. Modern products often contain high THC levels, increasing impairment and risks for parents.[1] Smoking or vaping produces rapid onset with shorter duration, while edibles have delayed onset, last longer, and carry a higher risk of overconsumption.[1]

Edibles & Vaping Risks

- THC edibles (gummies, brownies, candies) often resemble kid-friendly snacks, driving a 1375% increase in poison control calls for children under 6 (2017–2021).[7] Concentrated THC oils and vape cartridges often contain very high potency, and children have been poisoned after ingesting liquid, inhaling, or playing with devices.[8]

Secondhand Smoke & Household Safety

- Marijuana smoke contains many of the same toxins as tobacco smoke.[2] Children exposed to marijuana smoke or vapor are at risk for respiratory illness, developmental effects, and may even test positive for THC.[2] Homes with substance use are more likely to be unsafe (drug paraphernalia left out, poor hygiene, missed health care visits).[3]

Long-Term Child Outcomes

Parenting Practices & Emotional Connection

- Marijuana use can increase negative parenting behaviors such as aggression, harsher punishment, and inconsistent caregiving.[9] Impairment may also reduce a parent's ability to respond to a child's needs for hunger, comfort, learning, or play.[3] This can contribute to attachment problems, emotional insecurity, and anxiety, as well as greater risk for substance use.[3,9]

Educational & Developmental Effects

- Reduced stimulation, play, and learning activities at home can impair children's cognitive development. Children affected by parental substance use face higher risk of poor school attendance, educational delays, and limited engagement in learning.[3]

Behavior Modeling

- Children often imitate parental behavior. Youth with parents who use marijuana are 1.5 to 3 times more likely to use marijuana and are also at greater risk for tobacco, alcohol, and opioid use.[10]
- Marijuana is especially unsafe for teens, as it disrupts brain development and increases risk for mental health and substance use disorders.[2,10]

Implications for Practice

Professionals should screen for marijuana use during pregnancy, postpartum, and well-child visits; address safe sleep, supervision, storage, and exposure risks; and reinforce in clinical and community settings that legalization does not equal safety.

For suggested responses to common questions, scan the QR code.

Center of Excellence
Drug Free AMERICA Foundation, Inc.

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