

Protecting Adolescents from Marijuana

America's law states, "A person shall not knowingly possess or use marijuana, which means all parts of any plant of the genus cannabis" (Jacobs 47) However 42% of high school seniors report having used marijuana illegally in their lifetime (National Institute on Drug Abuse 5). That is to say, almost half the students who make it to the 12th grade have already smoked marijuana. This statistic does not even address juveniles that drop-out before the last year of high school. Marijuana is a dangerous and illegal substance, so why do so many students use it and how are they at risk by using marijuana? Research tells us students who use marijuana do so out of a weak psychology and are at risk of its dangerous side effects, but school and government policies can and must be equipped to protect them from this drug.

Before marijuana usage among teenagers can be effectively abated, it is vital to note why minors decide to abuse this substance. Adolescents feel pressured to smoke by peers or out of an already existing dependence on marijuana (Gottfried 26). When tested, adolescents were twice as likely to take risks when accompanied by other adolescents (Scott 41). This is evidence of how peer pressure may lead to drug abuse; simply put, students who smoke marijuana can and probably will influence other students to try it as well. Once a teenager begins to smoke marijuana, they can form a psychological dependence for it (Gottfried 13). This creates the dangerous cycle of substance abuse. Smoking marijuana is a common trend among young people, for those who do it are considered cool by their peers. While it may not be very hard for teens to light up, it may be more difficult for them to stop.

The damage caused by marijuana is another vital reason for its prohibition among teens. Marijuana's innate properties can cause short-term brain damage and lung cancer. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, "marijuana intoxication can cause distorted perceptions,

impaired coordination, difficulty with thinking and problem solving, and problems with learning and memory. Research has shown that, in chronic users, marijuana's adverse impact on learning and memory can last for days or weeks after the acute effects of the drug wear off" (1). Obviously these effects on the brain are especially harmful for students. Their inflicted attention spans will impair their learning. Additionally marijuana can cause lung cancer. Marijuana smoke contains 50-70% more cancer-causing chemicals than tobacco smoke (National Institute on Drug Abuse 3). This disease can be terminal. Not only can marijuana abuse harm a student's ability to learn, it could also kill that student.

Because of the danger which accompanies smoking marijuana, schools must use whatever means possible to protect their students from this threat. Schools may use random student drug testing to ensure their students safety from substances like marijuana. The first reason to implement this system is drug testing in schools reduces drug use among the students. According to a study by Joseph Mckinney, J.D., Ed.D. on drug testing in schools, "85% of the high school principals reported an increase in either drug usage or alcohol usage among their students after the drug testing program stopped" (Carroll 24). This proves that if schools use random drug testing they can prevent and discourage substance abuse; schools can also provide treatment for a student who fails the drug test. Another reason for schools to use random drug testing is that it is affordable. It would only cost \$1,500 a year for a high school of 1,000 students to test a 10% portion of at risk students (Carroll 25). Isn't keeping juveniles safe from harmful substances worth the cost? If Schools use random student drug testing they can prevent marijuana usage among minors, discourage students from abusing the drug and help students who abuse marijuana deal with their problems, and all of this is available at a reasonable cost.

Another barrier to prevent juvenile marijuana abuse is the government. If the United

States government imposes heavier penalties for juveniles guilty of marijuana possession, then young people will be discouraged to smoke marijuana by the rigid, imminent consequences. A fourteen-year-old girl was convicted of possession of marijuana; she was sentenced with one year of probation, mandatory family counseling and a government drug awareness class. Not long after the verdict was rendered, the individual was caught using drugs again. This pattern of substance abuse and punishment continued until she spent two and a half weeks in jail (Jacobs 50). However if her original sentence had been stricter than generally just probation, it could have kept her from continuing to abuse drugs. Scott reports, “Much anecdotal evidence indicates that young criminals of a generation ago assumed that they were insulated from punishment by virtue of their status as juveniles, and this may have encouraged some to engage (or persist) in delinquent activities” (Scott 193). In other words, minors have a frivolous perception of the law because of its restrained policies towards them; students can smoke marijuana knowing that the resulting penalties will most likely be slight due to their age. If the law was more strict in imposing consequences on teenagers who abuse marijuana, then students would be greatly discouraged from smoking whether by the threat of a serious legal penalty or by actually enduring such a penalty.

Students smoke because it is socially acceptable even though it is very harmful; however legal and education systems can protect minors from the effects of marijuana abuse. Teens will use marijuana because their developing minds are extremely vulnerable to peer pressure. Smoking marijuana is dangerous for students especially though, for it damages the user’s ability to concentrate. Schools may reduce marijuana usage by employing random student drug testing programs. The government can also cut down juvenile marijuana abuse by increasing the legal penalties on minors guilty of marijuana possession. Teenagers are putting themselves in danger

of marijuana's effects, but this is preventable. Everyday multitudes of minors are lead to smoke marijuana by deviant influences; it is society's responsibility to prevent such behavior because the continuity of this action will result in serious disadvantages to the vulnerable youths.

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