



**"ITS NOT AS MINOR AS
IBUPROFEN, BUT NOT AS
BAD AS COCAINE OR
HEROIN."**

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CANNABIS

THE BREAKWATER PROJECT TEAM

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Cannabis, or marijuana, is now legal in more states than it is illegal. Wisconsin is on an island with states all around us making cannabis legal for medical or adult use. In 2020, Governor Tony Evers announced his plan to legalize marijuana under the state budget and, more locally, Oshkosh City Council member Aaron Wojciechowski shared his plans to act locally on the issue.

Cannabis culture is a movement and the industry is rapidly growing. From celebrities starting cannabis companies to social media influencers, advertising and exposure reaches from highway billboards to the devices in our hands.

The debate on decriminalization and/or legalization of marijuana is both political and personal. The consequences are far reaching for both action and inaction in any direction. As part of our work with the Drug-Free Communities Grant and focus on youth substance use prevention, we knew we needed to learn more. We needed to understand the questions, concerns and feelings of our community members so we could provide local resources, information and support.

In an effort to better understand the needs of our community we hosted community conversations with middle school and high school students as well as parents of middle and high school students. We worked with several community partners to create space and time for these conversations.

Overall, the sentiment was consistent across all three age groups: marijuana is an in-between drug. There is a lot of confusion surrounding the legality, the potency and how it really affects a person long-term. There is also a disconnect between parents and children in terms of the conversations they are (or are not) having about substance use and marijuana in particular. The messages parents think they are sending are not the messages received by children and parents are waiting too long to have the conversations based on the reported age of exposure.

Key Challenges & Improvements Needed



We experienced several challenges throughout this project due to COVID-19 closures, restrictions, and cautions.

- It was difficult to hear participants and facilitate some sessions due to masking and distancing requirements.
- Even though many schools had transitioned back to in-person delivery, there were limitations on visitors coming into classrooms. Where we were able to facilitate in-person conversations, masks and social distancing were required which made it more difficult to fully engage with participants and appeared to distract from participant to participant interaction as well.
- While we wanted to engage with LGBTQ+ groups in particular, we were unable to do so. Partners serving or representing this community declined participation as many of the safe-spaces had been closed or were otherwise inaccessible due to pandemic related restrictions and closures. Although some groups and spaces were beginning to re-open, they felt the timing was not right for a conversation of this nature.
- We also wanted to engage with non-parent guardians of middle and high school groups. However, with substance use, relapse, and overdoses on the rise over the past year representatives thought this topic was 'too sensitive' at this time.
- Additionally, the timing of our conversations coincided with the end of the school year and summer activities picking up, making it difficult for parents to find time in their schedules to attend a session either in-person or virtually.

IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

We would like to host these conversations again with the following improvements:

- Increased parent participation
- Non-traditional guardian participation
- Sessions dedicated to LGBTQ+, BIPOC community members for all age groups
- Student led sessions after students receive facilitation training



Procedure

We reached out to several community partners including schools, youth serving organizations, faith communities and parent groups for engagement in this project. Conversations were scheduled with each participant group: middle schoolers, high schoolers, and parents of middle or high school children.

In the end, we held 8 sessions and heard from 48 middle schoolers, 50 high schoolers and 10 parents of middle and high schoolers.

Breakwater's Data Team determined 3 questions that would be asked, and each group was asked the same set of questions:

1. What do you know about marijuana?
2. How do you think marijuana impacts your body?
3. Have you had conversations with your [*parents/guardians/children*] about marijuana or other drugs? If so, what did those conversations look or feel like?

Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes which allowed for discussion and follow up questions. Facilitator's provided an introduction to the conversation, along with some ground rules including respecting others and that we were creating a safe space free of judgement.

PARTICIPANTS, RECORDING & ANALYSIS

Participants

Middle Schoolers: 48
High Schoolers: 50
Parents:10

Recording & Analysis

To ensure participant comfort in sharing their thoughts and feelings related to marijuana, audio and video recording devices were not used during the conversations. Comprehensive notes were taken during the sessions, however.

After the sessions, the notetakers and facilitators debriefed and reviewed the notes to identify themes, common questions, and notable differences in feedback from the groups. The themes, common questions, and notable differences are in the next section of this report.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT MARIJUANA?

"It's legal here, right? Isn't it?"

- Marijuana is a plant with a distinct smell
- It has two main components: THC (the component that gets you high) and CBD (which does not get you high)
- The cannabis industry is very large - and growing!
- Marijuana is legal in some states, but not others
 - Some states have medical marijuana, some have recreational, some have both
- There are many nicknames including:
 - grass
 - herb
 - gas
 - weed
 - pot
- It has become or is becoming more socially and culturally acceptable
- Some people use it to treat illnesses like cancer or opiate addiction
- There are many forms or ways to use it
 - smoke
 - dab/wax
 - edibles
 - vape/oils
- I know someone who does it / has done it
- Controversial whether or not it is actually safe

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Generally speaking, people seem to know what marijuana is, or isn't.
- There were no major knowledge gaps between the age groups, i.e. one group did not seem to know significantly more or less about the substance than any other.
- There was some confusion about whether or not marijuana is legal in WI and how CBD could be legal, but not marijuana.
- There was little to no knowledge about Delta 8 ("weed lite") expressed during these sessions.
- Many participants shared that they knew someone who is currently using cannabis, or has used cannabis in the past. This is true of all age groups.

HOW DO YOU THINK MARIJUANA IMPACTS THE BODY?

An in-between drug

- It can cause memory loss, kills brain cells
- It can help with cancer or other illnesses
- It's not an addictive substance on its own
- Lowers inhibitions, can slow brain development
- Some people use CBD or THC to help children with seizures
- Helps to manage stress or 'take the edge off'
 - Can help with ADHD and anxiety
- Makes you hungry
- Can kill you if it's laced
- It can hurt short term memory - but I'm not sure if it really does anything to long-term memory or has long-term effects.
 - "People I know who have done it for years don't seem to have any long-term effects."
 - I'm not aware of any physical withdrawal symptoms of marijuana if someone stops using it
- I'm actually very curious about it. The effects of alcohol are very apparent - does marijuana have the same effect? Is there a measurable amount like with alcohol?
- There are legal consequences, too. Not just physical consequences of how you feel
- "It's kind of in-between. It's not as bad as cocaine or heroin but it's not as minor as ibuprofen."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There is a lot of confusion about how marijuana impacts us both short and long term.
- There is a lot of confusion about how marijuana use equates to alcohol use. The effects of alcohol are 'very apparent' and you know when you can no longer drive or function appropriately. Is there a similar way to know or measure that level with marijuana?
- While all age groups expressed that marijuana is "bad", all groups also expressed that it wasn't the worst substance, either.
- There is enough conflicting information out there that people are not sure what to believe.

WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATIONS HAVE YOU HAD WITH YOUR PARENT(S) ABOUT MARIJUANA?

"If my mom wanted to talk to me about it she should've done it a long time ago."

Middle Schoolers

- We've talked about the complications, addictions, and delusions
- They basically just said don't do it, or else
- My parents used marijuana in the past and talked to me about it
- My parents mostly warned me about peer pressure and making good decisions
- We don't talk about it much - I know they don't want me to do it and I would be in trouble if I did
- We talked about it in health class and I talked to my parents about that
- We don't need to talk about it because I know I'm not going to do it

High Schoolers

- My family has a history of addiction so we've talked about it a lot and have open communication
 - Addiction happens - it doesn't make you a bad person you just have to get through it
- We've not talked about marijuana specifically, but we have had conversations about drugs in general. The main message was just to "stay away from it."
- My parents don't drink or do drugs so they just expect us not to do it either. We don't really talk about it, though.
- "If my mom wanted to talk to me about it she should've done it a long time ago."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Only about 15% of middle and high school participants said they had conversations with their parents.
- Several participants shared that they have a history of substance use in their family which, in some cases, has led to more open communication about substance use and consequences.
- Several participants felt it was less of a conversation and more their parents telling them how much trouble they'd be in if they did it.
- Some students expressed a hesitancy to approach their parents with questions. "I don't want them to think I'm doing it or want to do it and get mad."

WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATIONS HAVE YOU HAD WITH YOUR CHILD(REN) ABOUT MARIJUANA?

*"I've talked about it before,
but it is probably time to bring
it up again."*

Parents

- My 5th grader seems a bit young yet - I don't think she's really been exposed to it or offered it. She just had DARE and we've talked about what she learned there, though.
- I think open dialogue is important. We try to talk about it and find news stories and have the kids watch them with us and talk about it
- We would talk about it - but at some point it got too much for us to handle on our own. We involved a counselor and keep that up once a week. I think that helps a lot, and could help other people, too.
- I've had a few conversations in the car - what have you heard or seen - that type of thing. I should probably do it again.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Some parents are having conversations with their children, but many are not.
- Many parents are not sure what to say, or how to start the conversation.
- There is hesitation about bringing it up too early or sparking curiosity.
- There is a concern of parents that they don't know enough to even have the conversation.
- Where parents feel they are having open discussion, teens are walking away with a "don't do it or else!" message.
- Parents are worried they will bring it up too early, before children are ready, while children are hesitant to go to parents with questions because of parental perception of why they are asking.
- Parents are hungry for resources including discussion guides, scenarios they could use with their kids, and even stories of lived experience from young adults or teens who have suffered negative consequences of use.



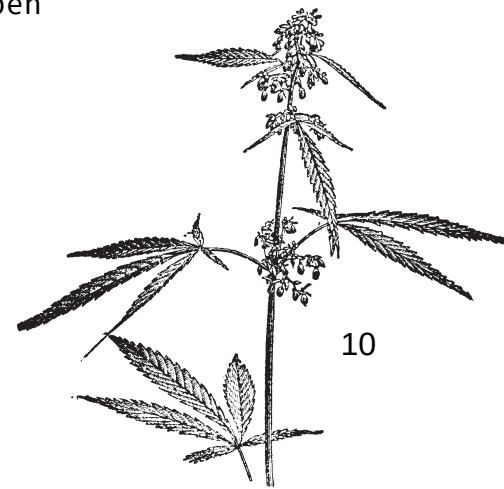
Lessons & Learnings

Lesson 1: Kids know more than we think, earlier than we think.

- Kids start hearing about drugs during health class and in-school programs around 5th grade.
- Kids report being offered, sold, or otherwise exposed to drugs in real life (i.e. not as part of a curriculum) as early as 6th grade. Many are exposed earlier.
- Most kids have access to a computer, smartphone or other internet-connected device around the age of 10. For some of them, this includes their own social media accounts. There are advertisements for marijuana, or marijuana related products and videos featuring celebrities (and potentially peers) that include references to marijuana, alcohol or other drugs.
- Verbal references and images of marijuana are becoming commonplace on TV shows and in movies - several of our participants reported noticing this.
- Kids have questions they'd like to ask, but are hesitant to do so for several reasons:
 - Parental perception or reaction to the question.
 - Fear of judgement from parents, peers, or others.
 - "It's easier just to google it."

Lesson 2: As parents, we're waiting too long.

- Some parents feel a need to wait until their child is 'old enough' for the conversation. When asked what 'old enough' means to them, it does not seem to be a specific age, but rather a point in time after they know their child has been exposed.
- Some parents avoid the conversation because they're not sure how to start it, or they're worried that talking about it will spark curiosity and make their children want to try drugs or drinking.
- Some parents take a more reactionary approach to the conversation. Once their child is suspected or confirmed to be using marijuana, they talk about it. These conversations tend to be more one-sided and punitive and do not foster open communication.



Recommendations

Start talking early.

The Wisconsin Department of Health's Small Talks campaign and SAMHSA's Talk. They Hear You campaign encourage parents to start talking to their children about alcohol and other drugs around the age of 8 or 9. This can feel like an extremely early age to be having tough conversations about substance use, we hear you. However, keeping the discussion open, honest and age-appropriate matters.

Both the Small Talks and Talk. They Hear You campaigns have parent resources and materials to help you get the conversation started, answer those tough questions and materials to help us understand what motivates teens to use substances.

We also encourage parents to take advantage of every-day opportunities to talk to their kids. If you see a news story, or they ask a question you weren't expecting, do your best to answer or find the answer together. If they ask a question or make a comment about your after-a-hard-day beverage, don't take offense! Take the opportunity to talk about healthy and unhealthy relationships with alcohol, how to know the difference, and why drinking before the age of 21 is dangerous. These short moments go a long way to establish open communication.

Get involved.

This recommendation can be taken several ways.

1. Get involved in your child's life. Ask them what they see, hear and experience in school and around the community. Have they witnessed marijuana or other substance use in or around school or their after-school job? How about on social media or the internet? Do they have questions? Do they have any concerns about their friends or siblings?
2. Get involved in the community. Engage with your friends, the parents of your children's friends and your neighborhood association. Talk about youth substance use and how the adults in the community can be a resource for each other, and the children.
3. Get involved with Breakwater. Community members are the most powerful resource for any coalition. You are the eyes, ears and heart of the community. You know where the high risk areas are. You know what is positively and negatively impacting your child(ren). Getting involved in a coalition like Breakwater leads to community level change that benefits all of us.

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