

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



## Key Details

### KEY WORDS

Youth; Adolescents; Cannabis  
Legalization; Parents; Prevention;  
Substance Use

### POPULATION GROUP

All Youth

### STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness  
Strong, Supportive Friends & Families

### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

### SOURCE

Academic

**“Our analysis suggests how parents have been largely disempowered and unsupported when it comes to addressing adolescent drug use in the family context. Even as they expressed their awareness that formal supports and resources to assist them were lacking, parents also assigned blame to themselves – or to other parents – for ‘failing’ to prevent problematic cannabis use” (p. 1).**

## ‘Parents Are The Best Prevention’?

## Troubling Assumptions In Cannabis Policy

## And Prevention Discourses In The Context Of Legalization In Canada

### 1. What is the research about?

Youth in Canada have one of the highest cannabis rates in the world. In the lead up to cannabis legalization in 2018, experts identified prevention programming to reduce cannabis-related harms for youth as an urgent public health priority. Discussions on cannabis in the public sphere often focus on the need to develop prevention resources and drug education in schools, public health and for parents. This study puts a spotlight on the parental role in preventing problematic adolescent cannabis use. It also questions the idea of parents as the best prevention.

### 2. Where did the research take place?

Data for the study was gathered in Vancouver, British Columbia. Vancouver is characterized as a ‘cannabis-friendly’ city, where use was somewhat normalized before legalization.

### 3. Who is this research about?

The study explored the degree to which parents have supports to prevent problem substance use and resources available to them for discussing cannabis use with youth. Parents who participated in the study had at least one child over the age of 13 years who had experience with cannabis use.

### 4. How was the research done?

The study took place between February and June 2016. A total of 16 participants were recruited. Participants were recruited through referrals from contacts in school-based parent advisory councils, local neighbourhood parent groups and volunteer-based support groups run by parents whose children had experienced substance use problems.

During interviews, participants were asked to discuss their experiences talking to their children about using cannabis. Parents were asked about supports and resources they needed to guide their discussions with youth. They were also asked to identify challenges they faced in responding to perceived problem cannabis use. The study relied on qualitative research methods. Researchers identified study limitations, such as small sample size. Additionally, the sample skewed professional, middle-class and ‘normative’.

## 5. What are the key findings?

The following findings emerged:

- **The normal, healthy and developing adolescent brain is viewed as at-risk.**

In discussing the developing brain, parents' role was described as that of protecting young brains to ensure productivity and longevity. The researchers argue that the focus on producing healthy and successful children was overly engrossing, preventing parents from deeply reflecting on models that only saw youth with prospects as those with "healthy and normal" brain functions. Additionally, the researchers found parents less frequently used harm-reduction strategies.

- **Parents as agents of prevention.**

In interviews, parents described preventing substance use as contingent on parents' knowledge and ability to communicate with their children about cannabis use. Therefore, prevention not only depended on knowledge held by parents, but their ability to communicate well, too. Researchers identified concerns with this approach. Namely that these models reduced drug prevention to the level of the parent-child relationship, and relied too heavily on parents being strong communicators. Additionally, the success of this model relied on family settings being relatively free of what may be perceived as dysfunction.

In analysis, researchers found that pressures governing "good parenting" individualized responsibility while inadequately dealing with larger social contexts affecting families. Researchers called for more nuanced approaches to youth substance use, which thoughtfully look at the lived experiences of youth and their families.

## 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research is important in light of cannabis legalization in Canada. Youth workers can play a role in supporting parents in the development of prevention resources targeting problem cannabis use. By using findings from this study, youth workers can support the development of nuanced resources for youth using cannabis.



Haines-Saah, R. J., Mitchell, S., Slemon, A., & Jenkins, E. K. (2018). 'Parents are the best prevention'? Troubling assumptions in cannabis policy and prevention discourses in the context of legalization in Canada. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.06.008