

Marijuana and the teen brain — tips for parents

By TONY REED ³⁵⁰
Of The Beacon
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About 60 residents and 20 police, media and volunteers sat scattered around Cotton Auditorium March 11 to hear Ralph Cantor speak about the effects of marijuana on the adolescent brain.

Winner of the California School Board Association's Award of Excellence, Cantor is the author of "Days of Respect," a program

developed by students, parents and teachers working to end verbal, emotional, sexual and physical harassment and abuse in the school

community. Cantor has worked in public education for 40 years as a math and science teacher, school counselor and administrator. He



Cantor

has been with the Alameda County Office of Education for the last 13 years, coordinating drug, tobacco and violence prevention programs, and speaking to students around the state.

He spoke of how marijuana releases dopamine in the brain, functions of the brain, ways marijuana use affects learning and the dangers of alcohol abuse by teens, especially females.

Cantor used a graph to show at

what age people started using drugs and alcohol. First time usage climbs through the teen years, drops by around 50 percent at age 17 to 18, according to the graph. he said if parents can keep kids from getting involved in drugs as teens, they will be less likely to start as adults.

Promoting resilience

Cantor said teens need to have

a positive relationship with at least one adult.

"In some ways, this is a no-brainer, but it's really powerful," he said.

Positive peer group activities that interest and motivate are important, as well as exposing them to things that will get youths involved in anything but drugs and alcohol.

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Cantor said statistics show that kids involved in church-based activities also have a higher resiliency and are less likely to try drugs. Statistics also show that taking care of a pet and participating in volunteer activities have the same positive effect.

Let's talk about it

"Say your kid comes up and says, 'Mom, I smoked [some marijuana]," he said. "What do you do?"

Rather than becoming immediately punitive, Cantor suggested that parents first ask, "So what happened, what did it feel like, how do you feel about it?" Cantor sympathized with parents on the issue of talking to kids about drugs.

"It's necessary to begin to get into a dialog about this stuff," he said, "as opposed to just going ballistic about it, because it doesn't work and it doesn't help."

Cantor's advice on how parents can talk to kids

came in four parts:

- I care,
- I see,
- I feel
- and [then] listen.

He said first and always, parents need to let children know they love them. Cantor gave the example, "I love you, you're my kid and you're the most important thing in my life."

Next, parents can open by communicating what they see, such as the prevalence of marijuana on our society. He said parents can also say they heard (or read) his presentation.

A parent can say the information scared or upset them enough to want to talk about the issue.

"Then let the child talk," he said. "The more they're talking and the more you're discussing this stuff, the better off you are."

He said parents also need to set clear expectations and consequences. Cantor said it's OK to say that, as a parent, you do not want your child doing drugs or drinking, no matter how many other kids are doing it.

He suggested that long before a child has an opportunity to get involved, a dis-

Tips from Ralph Cantor

- Say "I care, I see, I feel" and then listen
- Establish clear expectations and consequences
- Continue communication and monitoring
- Practice integrity and self-assessment
- Teen-proof your home, remove all alcohol and prescription medications
- Get them connected with healthy clubs, activities and volunteer organizations

cussion should occur about the possible punitive consequences. Ask the child what he or she feels the disciplinary action should be.

"Let your child work it out with you," he said. "That way they have some ownership of it. Otherwise, they just feel like they have been done to. I think it's really worth sitting down and discussing what consequences we should share if you break the agreement."

Continuing to communicate and monitor teen's activities is essential to maintaining an agreement.

Cantor said a parent he'd spoken to stays up to greet her teen when he comes home from late activities. The parent said when the teen walks in, she immediately hugs him.

"I want to smell him, I want to look at him, I want to know what's going on with my child," Cantor relayed.

Though kids will, by nature, say they want to experience things, parents have every right and responsibility to say, "not yet."

As adults

"As adults we have to look at our own relationship with drugs and alcohol," he said, referring to integrity and self-assessment.

Cantor said later that adults also need to know exactly what takes place inside the brain and body when under the influence.

"I think this community has very little real information about how marijuana works," he said later. "We need to understand how it

affects the hippocampus, how it affects the nucleus accumbens, how it affects the cerebellum. People need to understand this stuff, rather than just assume] that it makes you hungry and your eyes get bloodshot."

He said that over time, the drug will lose its desired effect, requiring increasingly frequent use.

"Do we have difficulty separating from the drug? Does it in any way impair our health or social functioning?" Cantor asked. "This is ... a quick and dirty way of self-assessing our own relationship with drugs and alcohol, which I suggest we need to do as parents."

Get connected

Getting kids connected with school, family, clubs, sports and other positive activities is the most important way to prevent drug or alcohol involvement.

"I can't say enough about this one," Cantor said. "Kids need social skills, it doesn't come out of the blue."

He said they need to learn the basics of initiating and maintaining friendships

with peers and adults.

Cantor recommended visiting the website <http://time.toact.drugfree.org> which he said answers two important questions: What to do if you suspect your child is using drugs and what to do if you know for sure? It gives a variety of scenarios parents can look at to determine how they might speak to their own kids.

Cantor recommended to following books to parents: "Marijuana, What's a Parent to Believe?" by Timmen L. Cermak M.D., "Uppers, Downers, All-Arounders" by Darryl Inaba, Pharm.D. and William Cohen, and Alcohol, What's a Parent to Believe? By David J. Hanson, Ph.D.

Cantor said he will forward a copy of his PowerPoint presentation to parents or answer questions via email. Send email requests to rjcantor@aol.com.

More information and an interesting virtual tour of the teen brain can be found at http://www.theantidrug.com/DRUG_INFO/marijuana-and-teens-brain.asp

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