

Talking About Cannabis: A Toolkit for Parents

Information and guidance on cannabis use among
young people and advice on talking to your child
about cannabis

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About this toolkit

Talking to your child about cannabis (also called weed) can feel hard — especially if it seems like they know more about it than you do. This guide is here to help parents and carers. It gives clear, fact-based information about cannabis and how it affects young people.

This guide was made using real stories from young people and parents in Sunderland. It includes **key facts about cannabis** and its effects and **signs to look out for** if you think they might be using it. You'll also find **helpful tips** on how to talk to your child about cannabis in a calm and confident way. Also in the toolkit are **examples of how to respond** when your child talks about things they think are good about cannabis, and ways to keep the conversation open and honest. This guide also gives advice on what to do if the chat doesn't go well, and where to get extra help.

The aim is to give you the **knowledge and support** you need to talk openly with your child — without arguments or stress.

Key concerns for parents in Sunderland

Many parents in Sunderland feel it's hard to take action when it comes to cannabis use. They often know that cannabis can be harmful to health and that it's common in their area. But they also say they don't know enough about certain things, like:

- How to start and have a chat with their child about cannabis. Many parents like the idea of learning how professionals talk to young people about it.
- How to explain clearly why cannabis can be harmful, especially if their child says good things about it.
- How their child is getting cannabis.
- What help and support is out there.

"I feel they know more than me...and to get them to listen to you is challenging because they just see an old man trying to tell them what to do." (Sunderland carer)

For parents who are concerned and aware of an issue, they are often worried that if they bring it up, their child will dismiss it, which can be seen as damaging to trust for future conversations about drugs. It is common for parents to:

- Want to be completely sure their child is definitely using cannabis before taking what they see as serious action.
- Worry that they do not have enough knowledge to handle a discussion, and that their child will know more about cannabis than they do
- Worry that if their attempts to address cannabis use lead to conflict, this could mean their child is less open about drug use in the future (including more harmful drugs).

This toolkit was created with all these concerns in mind, to give you information and knowledge about cannabis so you feel confident and able to have a good, helpful conversation about cannabis use with your child.

Key facts about cannabis use amongst young people

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis, also called **weed**, **marijuana**, **hash**, **grass**, and **green**, comes from a plant called *Cannabis sativa*. It can be made from dried leaves, flowers, stems, and seeds of the plant.

How do young people use cannabis?

Young people in Sunderland usually use cannabis by smoking it in a joint, like a cigarette. They also use **weed vapes**, **dab pens**, **bongs or buckets**, or eat cannabis in food called **edibles**.

What is CBD?

Cannabidiol (CBD) is a substance found in the cannabis plant. CBD doesn't make people feel high, or affect how they think and feel. CBD can often be found in things like supplements, foods, oils, and lotions.

What is THC?

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the substance in cannabis that makes people feel high. It also changes people's mood, thoughts, and views of reality. THC can be harmful to the brain and other parts of the body.

Are cannabis products getting stronger?

Yes. Cannabis has got much stronger in the last few years. This means it has much more THC than it used to. Having more THC means people find it harder to stop using cannabis. It also means a higher risk of other health problems.

What are synthetic cannabinoids?

You may have already heard of **Spice** or **K2**. These are synthetic cannabinoids – a bit like “fake cannabis”. They don't come from the cannabis plant. Instead, they are made in a lab. They were made to have a similar effect to cannabis. However, they are a lot more dangerous, and it is harder to know how strong they will be. They are associated with severe, potentially life-threatening side effects.

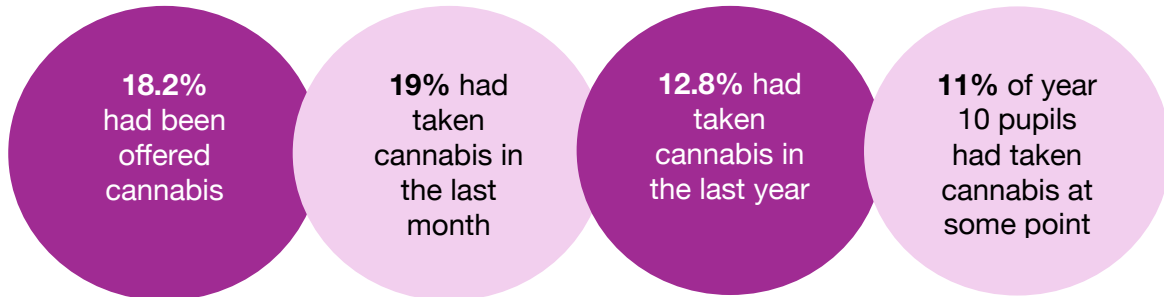
Why is cannabis so appealing to young people?

We asked young people in Sunderland why cannabis was appealing to them. We also asked why they might prefer cannabis to other substances, like alcohol. The key things that made cannabis attractive to young people were:

- **Some young people say cannabis is more fun than alcohol or nicotine** – they see alcohol as more likely to make them do things they regret later.
- **Knowing about cannabis or how to use it can make someone seem “cool”** – like if they know how to roll it, set up a bucket, or find someone who sells it.
- **It’s quick and easy to get** - many young people say they can get cannabis delivered within 30 minutes or less.
- **It’s sold on apps like Snapchat or Telegram**, which many young people in Sunderland already use.
- **It can also be used in school** – with some young people taking it in to use at lunchtime or on break, and sharing it with others.
- **There are lots of ways to buy cannabis** – young people can choose to get it delivered to them, buy it in parks, or arrange to pick it up from a hiding place.
- **There are lots of places where cannabis can be used in Sunderland without being caught** – smoking cannabis can be done in quiet outdoor areas, like parks and empty areas of land. Cannabis vapes are even easier to hide, and can be used indoors.
- **The financial cost of cannabis is quite cheap**. Young people said it was cheaper than alcohol in terms of “bang for your buck”. A group of friends could easily chip in to buy enough cannabis for them all to feel the effect. It would be more expensive to do the same thing with alcohol. Dealers will sell a “tenner bag” or “fiver bag” so that cannabis is even easier to afford.
- **Many dealers will let people pay later for cannabis** – this is called getting cannabis “on tic”. Young people might not realise how risky it can be to owe a dealer money like this.
- **Cannabis dealers are good at making cannabis seem exciting** – Dealers use the same sales tricks that you might see in a legal online shop: adverts, sale prices, giveaways and competitions.

The Sunderland Context

The [Health-Related Behaviour Survey in 2023](#), asked **5,970** children and young people in Sunderland about their health and behaviours. It found that amongst high school children:



The risks of cannabis use

It's important that your child knows the risks of using cannabis. It's also important to be honest. If you make the risks sound worse than they are, they might stop listening or not believe you.

Young people often don't notice any harm being caused when they use cannabis, especially for their first few tries. It helps to acknowledge that, while also talking about the real and sometimes serious risks that cannabis use can bring.

Cannabis may affect people in different ways depending on:

- How much they have taken
- How strong the cannabis is (Stronger cannabis has more THC)
- What other ingredients are mixed in with the cannabis (like tobacco)
- The way it is taken (smoked, eaten, vaped)
- Other drugs a person may have taken
- A person's underlying medical condition
- Age, sex, and genetic differences
- How often they use cannabis

The risks to young people from using cannabis are very real. Young people in Sunderland have shared some common risks they have found from using cannabis:

Short-term risks

- Doing badly at school
- Money problems or debt
- Problems with family and friends
- Anxiety and paranoia
- Arguing or falling out with friends
- Low mood or feelings of depression
- Reactions to cannabis i.e. being sick
- Being given dodgy 'cannabis'
- Getting into trouble with the police
- Accidents and injuries
- Anti-social behaviour
- Becoming addicted
- Sleeping problems
- Risk of exploitation
- Gateway to other drugs
- Feeling more irritable or restless

Longer-term risks

- Mental health problems like depression and anxiety, difficulties with learning, memory problems, finding it hard to concentrate
- Health problems like lung cancer, high blood pressure
- Later cannabis problems such as dependence
- Not managing to achieve your goals in life, feeling like you wasted your potential
- Anxiety or trauma from cannabis-related incident
- Problems with relationships because of using cannabis

How to spot cannabis use in your child

“He came home, and he was being really shifty - wouldn’t give us eye contact. Normally he likes to tell us about what’s going on, who said what, any drama, but he went straight up to his bedroom. I knew something wasn’t right.”
(Sunderland parent)

If you are worried your child is using cannabis, the best thing to do is to have an open and honest conversation about it (**see page 10** for tips and advice on how to do this). Remember that they will appreciate being treated as an adult. Being informed on cannabis yourself can help to make sure this conversation goes well.

The following signs don’t necessarily mean your child is using cannabis. However, these are some common signs that may be worth looking out for:

Your child may be using cannabis if they are:

- Being secretive about what they’re doing and where they’re going
- Having problems in school, like poor performance or absences
- Not sleeping properly and getting up very late
- Experiencing mood swings
- Seeming paranoid or anxious
- Constantly asking for money with nothing to show for it
- Appearing ‘spaced out’ or disengaged

Other potential signs of cannabis use are:

- The smell of cannabis
- Staying out late
- Headaches
- A change in eating patterns – either a loss of appetite or eating much more than usual
- Drowsiness (feeling very sleepy)
- Red-rimmed eyes and/or a runny nose
- Losing interest in school hobbies and friends – especially if this seems out of character
- Money going missing regularly for no apparent reason
- Unusual things found in the house, such as burnt foil or torn cigarette packets

- Packaging from cannabis products found in the house (such as small plastic bags, vape wrappers)

Get more information about how to tell if your child is using drugs (and how to support them) on the [FRANK](#) website.

What does a dab pen look like?

Dab pens, or THC vapes, can look like nicotine vapes. Some are brightly coloured, or have flavours that might appeal to younger people.

To give you an idea of what they look like, we have included examples below. These photos are all taken from real online stores offering dab pens for sale in the UK:



What should I do if I think or know my child is using cannabis?

“I knew there was something not right when they came home. At first, I thought it was alcohol, then I realised it was cannabis. I was so disappointed and upset I was crying, and that made them upset too.” (Sunderland parent)

Finding out – or thinking – that your child is using cannabis can be scary, especially if it seems like more than just trying it out. It’s normal to feel angry, but getting upset can lead to arguments and make it harder to talk about it later. It’s better to **stay calm** and **speak gently**.

Stay calm

Getting angry or shouting can make your child want to hide things from you. To have a good and honest talk about cannabis, it’s important to keep trust between you.

Don’t try to talk to them about it when they are high – wait until the effects have worn off and they can think more clearly.

Start a conversation

The best way to talk to your child about cannabis is to stay calm. Make sure you have enough time to talk and really listen to what they say. Try to make it a two-way chat. It’s important to be kind and not to judge or be too critical.

Talking about cannabis with your child

This section can help you to have a positive talk with your child about cannabis and their cannabis use.

"I find it challenging when we talk about it as he doesn't listen, and he thinks it's ok and he thinks it's getting legalised." (Sunderland parent)

Many parents in Sunderland feel worried about talking to their child about cannabis. They're often concerned that it will cause an argument, or make it harder to talk again later.

The model below has some helpful ideas to talk with your child about cannabis. It's important to be encouraging, honest, and open minded during the chat.

Good Conversations

- 👂 Active listening
- 🤝 Empathy and respect
- 👍 Encouraging and affirmative
- 💡 Collaborative
- 🎯 Satisfying



Getting started:

- **Sit down with them and tell them how you feel** e.g. “I’m worried because...” or “I’m concerned because...”.
- **Notice what your child says** – allow them to express their own feelings.
- **Create/take opportunities to talk** – there are often stories about cannabis in the media and on TV. You can use these to open conversations about cannabis with your child. This helps the chat to feel more natural.

Using questions:

- **Use open questions to keep the chat going** Open questions can’t be answered with just a yes or no – e.g. ‘What made you feel that you wanted to try it in the first place?’ - this helps to keep the conversation going. It also gives your child space to talk about how they feel.
- **Use closed questions when you need a clear answer** – this shows that you are keen to understand your child’s point of view e.g. ‘Is this what you mean?’.
- **Use indirect questions to be polite and maintain a gentle tone** – e.g. “I wonder if you would mind telling me about how that made you feel...”, “Could you share why you felt like you needed to use cannabis...”

Active Listening:

- **Listening to learn** – learn why your child is using cannabis, why they want to use/try cannabis, what they are hoping to gain from using it, what lead them to want to try it. Respect what they have to say – it is important not to lose your temper if you disagree.
- **Reflection** – playing back key things your child says, to make sure you understand what they are saying
- **Summarising** – summarising what they have said to show them you have heard and understood it.
- **A full guide to active listening is on page 13.**

Being encouraging and affirmative:

- **Recognise strengths and attributes** – recognise what they are doing well, and let them see that you are noticing the good things about how they are handling the talk.
- **Encourage positive plans and goals** – help them to think about what they want, e.g. to earn money, get a job, do well in school. Show them what they need to do to work towards these goals.

- **Notice the positive and the negative** – try to be fair. Even if you're concerned, point out the good choices your child is making too.

Offering assistance:

- **Ask what your child knows** – this allows them to show their own knowledge. It also shows that you aren't assuming what they know or don't know.
- **Offer the information in a neutral way** – take a balanced approach by providing your child with the facts about the effects and risks of cannabis. Make them feel empowered and informed rather than punished.
- **Let them know that you are there for them** – make sure they know you are always happy to talk more if they want

Being clear on next steps:

- **Make a plan together** – This can really help. Your child is more likely to act if there is a clear plan in place. Talk about what your child will do if they're around cannabis in the future. Think about tricky situations and how to say no, or do something else instead. Set clear rules, and agree on shared goals. Make sure you choose a time later to talk with your child about what's going well and what isn't.

“When I spoke to my son about using cannabis, we focussed on the risks and consequences rather than reprimanding him, and he responded really well to this. If I'd jumped down his throat, I think he would have rebelled, but now it seems easier for him to be open and tell us if he has an issue.”
(Sunderland parent)

A guide to active listening

Active listening is a way of listening carefully to your child and showing them that you are really paying attention. It shows that you care and are interested in what they have to say. This helps your child to feel safe, supported, and more willing to be honest about their thoughts and feelings. It also helps them to feel important and builds trust between you. Here are some top tips for active listening:

Ask Open Questions

- Questions that don't have a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Usually, this means questions that start with 'how', 'when', 'what', 'who', or 'why'.
- Avoid using 'why?' too much – it can make teenagers feel that they are being judged, so they stop wanting to talk
- Don't interrupt to ask questions
- Listen until you're sure they have finished what they are saying

Summarise

Gather the important parts of the conversation and share: "You feel left out when all your friends are using weed", "You feel like there are no risks to using cannabis".

Reflect

Just repeating a word or phrase can encourage them to carry on talking: "Yes, it is difficult", "You were really worried".

Clarify

Ask for more details: "Tell me more about that", "How exactly did that happen?".

Give words of encouragement

"Yes, I know what you mean", "I understand".

Leave quiet moments

Don't feel you have to fill the silence. Staying quiet while keeping your attention on them can encourage them to say something else.

React

Show that you understand how they are feeling: “That’s really hard”, “That must have made you feel anxious”, “It must be difficult to cope with that”.

Think about how they might be feeling – the emotion behind what they say is just as important as what they are saying.

Use non-verbal encouragement

Smiling, nodding, responding to their feelings with facial expressions or mirroring their facial expressions and keeping eye contact shows that they have your full attention.

Responses to common pro-cannabis arguments

*"They wouldn't listen to me because it's not something I've experienced."
(Sunderland parent)*

Talking to a strong-minded teenager who thinks they know everything can be difficult, especially when you feel like you don't have all the facts. It's worth having some answers ready for some of the things they might say. Being prepared can help you feel more confident when talking with your child.

Here are some common pro-cannabis arguments that your child might say, and ideas for what you could say back to them:

"It's natural so it's safe"

Many harmful substances are natural - tobacco, poisonous mushrooms, and even arsenic. Just because something comes from a plant doesn't mean it's safe, especially for a developing brain. Natural doesn't mean harmless.

"Weed isn't even addictive"

Not everyone gets addicted BUT weed *can* be very addictive - especially for teenagers. Lots of people don't realise they have a problem until they try to cut down or stop using weed. You may not feel addicted, but if it's hard to go without it - that's a warning sign.

"Weed is healthier and safer than alcohol"

Comparing two harmful substances doesn't make either one safe. Weed and alcohol both carry risks - especially for people your age. Weed causes problems with memory, attention, and motivation. These are all important things for relationships, school, and everyday life.

"Weed helps with anxiety"

It might feel like it helps in the short term. But it's not really helping, it's just covering up the feeling of being anxious. Using weed long-term can actually make anxiety worse. If you feel that you need help with your anxiety, let's talk about that. We can come up with a plan to help you with anxiety, instead of trying to self-medicate.

“Weed is good for helping manage symptoms of ADHD”

It might feel like weed can help with ADHD by making you feel calmer or more focussed. But the side effects can make the symptoms worse in the long run. Weed can make your short term memory worse, and make it harder to concentrate on things. It's better to use proper ADHD treatments from doctors to manage your symptoms.

“Weed helps me sleep better”

It can feel like weed helps with sleep because it makes you feel sleepy after using it. The problem is, going to bed high actually makes the quality of your sleep much worse, so you don't get a good rest. If you are using weed to get to sleep all the time, you can end up needing more and more weed to get the same effect. This can make it very hard to stop using weed, even if you really want to. If you are having problems with sleep, there are better ways to solve this – like getting help for anxiety.

“Everyone else I know smokes weed”

I know you might feel left out and it might *seem* like everyone is doing it, but that's often just what it seems. You can still have fun without using weed. And even if a lot of people do it, that doesn't mean it's good for you - especially if it puts your health or future at risk.

“There aren't any side effects to smoking weed”

Actually, there are. Weed can affect your memory, concentration, sleep, and mental health. In some people, especially people your age, it can increase the risk of depression and anxiety or even trigger psychosis. The effects can last well after the high wears off.

“You can't get into trouble for smoking weed anymore”

Cannabis is illegal in the UK. Teenagers can still face legal or school consequences. Anyone aged 17 or under found to be in possession can be arrested and taken to a police station. Plus, just because it's legal in other places, doesn't mean it's healthier. Cigarettes are legal too, but everyone knows they are not good for you.

How to handle a failed conversation attempt

“Yes, I’ve talked about his cannabis use with him. I get nothing from him, I have told him the dangers, but it doesn’t register with him.” (Sunderland parent)

It can be tough to try again if a conversation goes badly. If talking about cannabis caused an argument the first time, it might feel hard to bring it up again. But it’s important to keep trying. The goal is to keep things open and honest with your child. Even if the first chat didn’t go well, don’t give up — it helps build trust for future conversations.

Here are some tips on how to handle a conversation that didn’t go as planned:

1. Recognise that it’s a process

It’s normal if your first talks about cannabis don’t go perfectly. Young people often don’t like being told what to do or how to feel, and they might get defensive. Building trust and having good chats takes time, so keep trying.

2. Reflect on the conversation

After the discussion, take time to reflect back and think about:

- Your approach: Did it feel like a lecture instead of a discussion? Did you seem judgemental?
- When and where you chose to have a chat: Was your child preoccupied, stressed, or in a bad mood?
- How you were feeling: Were you calm and open, or did you start to get frustrated or angry?
- Preparation: Were you prepared for the reasons your child gave for using cannabis?

3. Maintain open communication

Even if the first talk did not go as planned, let your child know you’re always available to talk, and that you will try not to judge them. This helps keep things open. If your child knows it’s safe to share their thoughts, they will open up when they feel ready.

4. Seek support

If conversations still aren’t going well, consider getting some outside help. Some support organisations and links to useful websites are on the next page.

Where to access support

There are some great support services and organisations available in Sunderland and nationally for parents and caregivers who are worried about their child and cannabis.

YDAP

Youth, Drug & Alcohol Project (YDAP) is a specialist support service in Sunderland. They help young people under 18 years who have problems with drugs or alcohol. They give tailored, confidential support including one-to-one sessions and harm reduction advice. They can also help with related issues like mental health. YDAP work with schools, youth services, and families to offer early intervention and education.

Click the link for more information: <https://ydapsunderland.org.uk>

Together for Children (Sunderland)

Together for Children (Sunderland) provide services to support children, young people and families across Sunderland. Services include early help, safeguarding, education support, and youth services. They support young people affected by drug and alcohol use through education. They can also refer young people to other support.

Click the link for more information: <https://www.togetherforchildren.org.uk>

Sunderland Community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

CAMHS Counselling Service is provided at Community CAMHS bases in Southwick, Hendon and Washington. It is part of a wider CAMHS team offering mental health support to children and young people aged 5 to 18 who live anywhere across Sunderland. If you have concerns about a young person's mental health, you can approach their school, your GP or any other health professionals who may be working with you, for example a Health Visitor or School Nurse. They can then refer you into CAMHS.

FRANK

FRANK offers friendly and confidential advice and information on alcohol and drugs. Services include a 24/7 helpline, live chat, text support, and links to local treatment services.

Click the link for more information: <https://www.talktofrank.com/drug/cannabis>

Adfam

A UK-based charity that supports families affected by drug and alcohol use. They work with local services and professionals to help families get support, along with the person who needs help for substance use issues.

Click the link for more information: <https://adfam.org.uk/>

This toolkit was created by the Social Marketing Gateway (SMG) in partnership with YDAP and Sunderland City Council.



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