

6. The Safety of Childhood Cannabis Use

By Kevin Baiko, M.D.

Cannabis and kids – the connection scares people. As a doctor who has personally witnessed countless health successes among my ranks of patients who medicate with marijuana, I can testify to the healing power of the plant. In an age of such physical, mental and societal imbalance, many believe this herbal key to human homeostasis promises to revolutionize our diseased world as we know it. This, of course, threatens a wide cross-section of individuals, not the least of which those who find themselves in positions of “power” in aforementioned diseased world, and so we are bombarded with propaganda declaring pot as a dangerous and addicting menace to society. While most of these declarations, even those purporting to be backed by science, fall flat on their face to most as strained attempts to keep down the beach ball of truth (that cannabis is a powerfully effective and relatively safe herbal remedy), those concerning how cannabis might impact childhood development seem to invoke the highest degree of caution. Should parents be worried about their kids using cannabis? Are children harmed directly from cannabis use? How does maternal cannabis use effect the unborn or nursing child? How does childhood use of cannabis effect mental and physical development? I believe that simply asking these kinds of questions is a healthy first step in responsibly approaching this often emotionally loaded subject.

Truthfully answering such questions to everyone's satisfaction, even in this era of eroding prohibition, is not so simple. If we put aside hemp's empowering potential as a source of nutrition, clothing, manufacturing, fuel, etc. and just focus on its medicinal and recreational potentials, its status is already elevated by its effects on human consciousness into more than just a matter of science. Religious objections to cannabis use can only be over-ruled by spiritual revelation, and the fact that so many former religious objectors claim to actually have such revelations upon using cannabis may only strengthen the resolve of those who believe that pot undermines spiritual focus or distracts us from God. The politics of cannabis prohibition (and big money behind it) practically outlaw any research on cannabis unless a study's proposed design is to strengthen claims that cannabis is somehow dangerous. The so-called “war on drugs” has scared and misinformed generations of parents and children with its reefer madness propaganda machine, crippling critical thought and biasing scientific inquiry. Of course, our natural, at times irrational, parental wariness, caught between the sermons and laws of church and state, renders scientific assurance all the more inherently limited when applied to the safety of our kids.

While a review of 20th Century cannabis prohibition propaganda offers many baseless and even hilarious reasons to fear cannabis - that it incites violence, causes brain damage, leads to use of “harder” drugs, and the like..., they all seem to draw from a fear of the mind-altering properties of cannabis. This fear naturally intensifies when children might be involved. After all, the human nervous system is extremely complex and shouldn't be messed with, at least in its formative stages, right? Even if cannabis use itself causes no harm to a child's brain, what about the risk that its mind-altering effects could cause deficits in judgment leading to unsafe behavior? Couple these questionable hazards with very real legal consequences that the criminalization of cannabis has brought us, and it's understandable how many parents, even those who are regular users themselves, regard pre-adult cannabis use with displeasure. It's one thing to feed a vice as an adult, but one invites harsh condemnation to enable a child's “drug” use, or worse yet to expose a newborn or the unborn to questionable habits. Or so it seems to some, but are these concerns justified?

Propaganda should always be questioned and generally doubted. Cannabis does not incite violence nor cause brain damage. If anything, it relaxes the fight-or-flight response and is endowed with neuroprotective, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Cannabis is no more a “gateway” to using harder drugs than riding tricycles leads to riding motorcycles. Cannabis is not addicting. Neither does cannabis cause insanity nor any sort of demotivational syndrome. While it may be that some people prone to addiction or mental illness begin to express signs and symptoms after using cannabis, as some studies on cannabis use amongst schizophrenics have weakly demonstrated, cannabis has never been shown to be the actual cause of any such psychiatric condition. If anything, countless psychiatric patients have found cannabis to be a helpful if not their treatment of choice for addiction (prescription pain medications, alcohol, tobacco), affective disorders (anxiety, depression), post-traumatic stress disorder, autistic spectrum disorders, attention deficit disorder, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. The mind-altering effects of cannabis would seem to alter judgment, but whether or not such alterations should be considered “impairment” is debatable and arguably secondary to what parents can do to empower their child's judgment, starting with education with facts and problem solving skills (as opposed to propaganda.) In fact, the sum of political propaganda demonizing cannabis is so great and obviously ridiculous in scale that all past and present claims against cannabis should be greeted with extreme skepticism and with an open mind.

Ironically, cannabis seems to help many users do just that. The homeostatic properties of the endocannabinoid (eCB) system relax the mind and body out of stressful paradigms and postures once taken-for-granted. For many this relaxation comes and goes with the so-called “euphoric” (feeling good) effects of cannabis, but others learn from such experiences. Why fear a substance that helps people break free of stress-endowed conditioning – conditioning not only concerning the substance itself, but any conditioning that causes unnecessary stress? Chronic stress IS the modern day killer. Relaxation coupled with the slight alterations in how the world is perceived naturally leads many cannabis users to question given “truths”, rules, not to mention the authority of those perpetuating them.

Then again, fear of consequence is a time-tested tool in a state's control of its populace. Many parents use this tactic too. Could this explain why “euphoria” is often listed by authorities (governmental, religious, etc.) as a dangerous side-effect of marijuana? Our criminal justice system certainly turns cannabis use into a risky, stress-ridden, downright scary practice when consequences like jail time or loss of parental custody can result. Is the use of cannabis even remotely as dangerous as the legal system penalizing its use? The overwhelming body of science on the matter informs us in no uncertain terms: ABSOLUTELY NOT!

Honestly, there haven't been many controlled studies specifically measuring the effects of cannabis on childhood development, presumably due to legal restrictions on such studies. Most studies, especially maternal studies, have failed to isolate cannabis use from the use of other drugs (pharmaceutical or illicit) as a variable to measure relative risk of developmental defect, etc. However, one study did just that, perhaps because it took place in Jamaica, where cannabis remains a time honored folk remedy. This study demonstrated no negative effects in the babies exposed to regular maternal cannabis dosing (ranging from light to heavy) during their pregnancy. In fact, at the five year follow-up, children who were exposed to cannabis while in the womb demonstrated superior cognitive abilities compared to the control group whose mothers abstained from cannabis use (Dreher, et al). I am not aware of any such study focusing on cannabis use during lactation, but anecdotal evidence only seems favorable for mothers who use cannabis when breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is easier for the infant when the mother is at ease herself, and it turns out that human breast milk naturally contains eCBs, whether or not the mother uses cannabis. This finding makes sense considering how the eCB system calms the

gastrointestinal system and stimulates appetite. Apparently, infants thrive on cannabinoids.

Please don't mistake anything here as a call to supplement everyone with ganja. Like I said, cannabis is a powerful medicine. With power comes responsibility, and by that I mean that all cannabis use warrants reasonable caution. Positive effects need to be weighed against negative effects for each patient. Cannabis is a remarkably safe substance to use, regardless of its route of administration, but safety doesn't necessarily equate with optimization. For example, adolescents using cannabis tend to demonstrate temporarily worsened short-term memory function while using cannabis. On the other hand, short-term memory amongst elderly subjects tends to temporarily improve (Wenk). However, this finding doesn't mean that cannabis always compromises mental function in all pre-adults any more than it always optimizes mental function in older subjects. Adolescents with attention deficit disorder regularly report an optimization of their mental state when using cannabis, including: improved focus, calmness, impulse control and school performance. While an impressive body of evidence is accumulating linking its neuroprotective properties to the prevention and treatment of senile dementia, cannabis may well exacerbate symptoms in certain Alzheimer's patients. As with the effects and side effects of any medicine, some patients might find that cannabis causes certain mental or physical functions to improve while other functions worsen while using it. In advocating cannabis as a medicine, as opposed to a lifestyle, I am admitting that, even among pediatric populations, it's a good treatment option for some, and a not-so-good treatment option for others. No doubt, many subpopulations would be better off to avoid cannabis entirely, but the evidence just doesn't support any conclusion that cannabis is dangerous to babies, children or teenagers, in general.

To put this into perspective, let's examine some relative risks. Nobody has ever died directly from cannabis use. That is an incredibly powerful statement. Compare this fact to the hundreds to thousands of children who die in this country each year from car accidents, drownings, poisonings, suffocations and recreational injuries. Why then is it not considered taboo for parents to drive cars or to own poisonous household products or prescription medicines or to allow our children anywhere near water or to participate in sports? How many lives could be saved! Of course, I'm not arguing for such radical interventions, but rather to bring reason to all the irrational fear and condemnation which surrounds the exposure of our babies and children to cannabis use. Some will remain unconvinced. Cannabis may not kill anyone, but can we declare with certainty that pre-adult cannabis exposure is absolutely free of risks? No, but what in the world is? Again we can compare it to some more commonplace relative risks. Can we declare with certainty that childhood usage of computers or televisions or video games or cell phones poses no risks to our children's neurologic development? Numerous studies would counter such a declaration. What of the foods our children consume - the sugar and caffeine laden carbonated beverages, the fried and processed foods? What of fluoridated water and dental products? What of vaccinations? The damages these substances cause children are well documented. We can no more declare cannabis risk free, than can we declare the safest toy, the smallest pet, the cuddliest blanket or the most loving relative absolutely safe. To live in this world is to live with risks. Truly, if we could replace all things in our home with piles of cannabis, our children would no doubt be safer. Obviously, such a silly suggestion is only to make a point – we worry too much about our children using cannabis.

But let us not overstate our case, for unless otherwise indicated I do not recommend the use of cannabis to children, nor to pregnant or breastfeeding women. Most mothers know that the development of a child, especially during the first trimester, is a delicate matter and, as such, are prepared to go through great lengths to reform their lifestyles to purify their bodies as vessels for healthy babies. Women are willing to give up sweets, coffee, tobacco, alcohol, prescription and over-the-counter medications, and cannabis too. However, a woman's emotional and physical well-being directly impacts her baby as

well. Is it better for a pregnant woman suffering from depression or nausea or insomnia or a headache to carry her baby through these symptoms without medication or to treat the condition with a relatively safe remedy? While this is a personal choice, I would make a case for the latter, and I would extend this philosophy to breastfeeding women, to children, teenagers and adults of all ages. Fortunately, we do have a relatively safe treatment option for a wide variety of ailments, whether physical or psychological in nature. Cannabis is a safer to both mother and baby than pretty much any other pharmaceutical available in the treatment of suffering during pregnancy and beyond. If we really care for the well-being of our children, we should not rule out cannabis as a treatment option.

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