

Gettin' the dope on pot

Program tries to educate teens about marijuana

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TORONTO -- More than one in four Ontario high school students used marijuana last year.

So Parent Action on Drugs is launching a new provincial campaign to teach teens and their parents that marijuana is not a benign drug, that it can produce serious side effects like failing grades, sleep deprivation and anger-management problems.

The "What's With Weed" program doesn't push for zero use -- the old "just say no" approach to drugs -- but instead asks students to consider whether their pot use has become a problem in their lives.

Diane Buhler, executive director of Parent Action on Drugs, said the school-based, peer-led program and a website gives students the straight facts about marijuana and lets them make their own choices.

The website whatswithweed.ca -- featuring a self-quiz about marijuana use and messages from fellow teens -- will be launched Monday at the start of Drug Awareness Week.

Malvern Collegiate Institute Grade 12 student Natasha Lantz, who served as a youth adviser in the development of the program, said every student entering high school will have to make a choice about marijuana.

"It's definitely something that's always present," Lantz said.

It's important to give them information on how it can affect their lives, she said.

"Most people are under the impression that it's a harm-free drug," Lantz said.

Tom Walker, an addiction counsellor with Breakaway Youth and Family Services, said marijuana use can cause users to become chronically tired or angry.

Teenage users can "sleepwalk through school," leading to poor grades and failing ambition, he said.

Yet teens often fail to link the problems they're having in their home and school lives with marijuana use, he said.

"I think in terms of access it's easier to get than alcohol for many young people," he said. "Just walk into the corridor of any high school and you can pick it up."

WHO'S SMOKING?

Marijuana use among Ontario high school students:

- 26.5% of Grade 7-12 students report using cannabis at least once in the past year
- About one in 12 cannabis users in Grades 7-12 may have a dependence problem
- Weed use goes up with each grade, from 3% among seventh graders to 46.2% for 12th graders
- Toronto students' weed use is the lowest in the province at 20.1% compared to 33% in the north and west and 25.3% in the east
- Frequent use is up -- the percentage of high school kids using cannabis six times or more during past year is 12.8%, comparable to the late 1970s

<http://torontosun.com/News/TorontoAndGTA/2006/11/16/2378156-sun.html>