

Cannabis Conversations with Youth

Harm-reduction conversation guides



This guide was informed by scientific literature and developed in consultation with New Brunswick health professionals and the NB Youth Council to ensure it is evidence-based and relatable to how youth in New Brunswick want to be engaged. For more information visit nblung.ca/cannabis



Core Reminders

Respect Autonomy

If at any stage of the conversation the youth wants to pause, stop, or not discuss something, respect that choice, don't push, and leave the door open for future conversations.

Information Over Advice

A key goal is to **share facts** clearly, not just tell youth what to do. Give clear facts they can learn to **make safer choices** for themselves

Advice: "Don't drive while high"

Information: "Driving while high is riskier because reaction time, attention, and decision-making can be affected."

Link it to Their Goals

Connect cannabis use to what matters to them: school, sports, work, sleep, mood, memory, relationships.

Confidentiality → Permission → Use → Function → Goals → Safety → Information

Confidentiality: Clear confidentiality builds trust and supports honest conversation.

"What you share is private unless there is immediate safety risk."

Permission at Every Step: Supports youth autonomy and inclusion.

"Is it okay if I ask a couple questions about cannabis?"

If "No": Respect their choice and keep the door open.

"No problem. If you ever want to talk about it later, I'm here."

Ask About Use: Keep it neutral and routine.

"Have you used cannabis in the past few months?"

Ask Their Agenda: Focus on what matters to them.

"What do you want to know about cannabis?"

"Anything you've heard that you're unsure about?"

Assess Function: Don't jump straight to "don't do that!" Have a conversation first. Is it for: sleep, stress/anxiety, social comfort, boredom, pain, focus, coping.

"What does cannabis do for you?" "What do you like about it?"

Learn the "why" first, then offer targeted, safety information.

***Avoid: "Why do you use it?" This can sound accusatory**

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Link to Their Goals: Connect risks to what matters to them, for example:

Performance: “Could it affect your game this weekend or that test coming up?”

Mental Health/Mood: “Short-term help makes sense...any times it increases anxiety when the effects wear off/next morning?”

Sleep: “What happens on nights you don’t use? Any grogginess or worse sleep later?”

Quick Safety Check: Pick 2-3 to fit the conversation:

- Driving/riding high?
- Mixing with alcohol/other drugs?
- Before school/work?
- Memory, focus, motivation?
- Panic/paranoia?
- Other meds?
- Reproductive health?

Offer Information:

“Would it help if I shared some information about what can make use riskier or less risky?”

If “No”: Respect their choice. Don’t push.

Harm Reduction Menu:

Try: “Driving high increases crash risk”

Not: “Don’t drive high, its unsafe”

Try: “Regular, heavy use can affect focus and memory in the long term”

Not: “Don’t use and hurt your performance”

Try: “Cannabis use is linked to higher risk of mental health problems in some people, including anxiety, and schizophrenia”

Not: “Don’t use cannabis, it will cause mental illness”

Try: “Mixing substances increases impairment”

Not: “Don’t mix, you’re hurting yourself”

Try: “Lower THC / balanced THC:CBD may lower risk”

Not: “Don’t use high THC”

Try: “Smoking exposes the lungs to irritants, especially with deep inhaling or breath-holding”

Not: “Avoid smoking or take small puffs only”

Try: “Start low, go slow”

Additional Considerations

Validation Matters

Trust is fragile. Acknowledge what feels helpful to them before discussing risks.

Keep asking permission

Use permission throughout, not just at the start.

Tone

Be curious, not corrective.

Information over advice

Share facts, not lectures.