



## **Policy Perspectives - A Conversation with Marsha Rosenbaum**

Marsha Rosenbaum is Director Emerita of the Drug Policy Alliance, San Francisco. She has worked as a research sociologist for the Institute for Scientific Analysis, is a former grantee of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and is the President of the JK Irwin Foundation. She has authored numerous articles, books, and reports about drug use, misuse, and treatment, including “Safety First: A Reality Based Approach to Teens and Drugs,” and “Making Sense of Student Drug Testing: Why Educators are Saying ‘No’.” She is a nationally recognized expert on teens and drug use, and regularly speaks to PTAs, other parent groups, schools, drug treatment and prevention professionals about this issue.

### **You have been involved in drug policy for a long time. What brought you to the issue of marijuana and the work of the Blue Ribbon Commission?**

I received a doctorate in sociology from UCSF, and did research for the National Institute on Drug Abuse. I studied heroin addiction and treatment, crack cocaine, MDMA, and drug use during pregnancy. What seemed obvious to those of us working in the field was that one of the biggest problems for people addicted to illegal drugs was the criminal justice system. People addicted to other substances, like alcohol, didn’t go to jail just for possessing or consuming it. What our study subjects needed was drug treatment to really help them, but they were being arrested instead.

I am also a mother, and I was raising my own children at the time that the war on drugs escalated. Parents were really jumping on the Nancy Reagan “Just Say No” and DARE bandwagon. The message was all about abstinence, enforced by fear, misinformation, scare tactics, and admonitions like – “all drugs are evil and dangerous and no one should ever use them.” Of course, there definitely ARE serious dangers with using certain drugs, especially methamphetamine and heroin. But I knew that if we lumped all drugs together, it was doing kids a disservice. Kids know they’re not all the same, and they’ll disregard the whole message as a result - they’ll throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. I interviewed heroin addicts who had been told in school that marijuana was addictive. When they found out it wasn’t, they didn’t believe heroin was addictive, either, so they tried it.

I got involved with drug policy reform for this reason - I wanted to help kids, and not just my own. So I used my research skills to find out as much as I could about drug education, and my career shifted to policy. I went to work for Drug Policy Alliance, opening their San Francisco office. At DPA, I wrote a series of booklets designed for parents of teenagers, to help them navigate the teenage years vis-a-vis drugs. I knew that scare tactics weren’t working - marijuana use was prevalent among teens raised in the DARE and Just Say No era. My “Safety First” booklet is now in its sixth edition, and the advice remains essentially the same. I try to communicate to parents that while abstinence from drugs is the ideal choice, the reality is that

kids are confronted with drugs when they enter middle and high school, it's all around them, and you need a fallback strategy if they do decide to experiment. I tell parents that they need to keep the lines of communication open, to help their kids stay safe.

In school, kids need reliable curriculum based on real, credible, evidence-based information about drugs so they can make informed decisions. We need to equip them to make their own decisions, so that if they experiment with drugs, they know how to reduce the potential harms associated with any drug. They need to learn moderation, self-regulation, and other life skills. Kids are curious, but they're also smart. They don't want to hurt themselves. They often take risks, and parents need to be prepared to work with them.

When I joined the Blue Ribbon Commission, I wanted to convey to the Commission as a whole and the Youth, Education, and Prevention Working Group that drug education is important, but so are extracurricular activities. Kids need something to do, and in middle school, they still need supervision. Parents need to spend time with their kids at this age, even though it's hard for everyone. But supervision and activities outside of school may help keep kids from having the time or inclination to use marijuana. We need resources to keep kids off the streets and engaged. If you keep kids busy, occupied, and passionate, you will also keep them off drugs.

I think we need to look seriously at implementing Student Assistance Programs in high schools - a one-stop shop for drug education, prevention, and treatment. These programs provide counseling, referrals, group therapy and peer to peer accountability. They are a much better alternative to draconian zero tolerance policies, and they help to make safety the number one priority.

**In a recent interview, you talked about marijuana use among teens in states that have legalized the drug for medical and commercial use. What is happening in these states and what can be done to address youth access to marijuana?**

In revising my latest Safety First booklet, I looked at states with commercial, medical, and decriminalized marijuana markets. The prevalence lines in those states are pretty flat in terms of teenage use - it hasn't gone up, or down. No one really knows why, but that's because surveys don't ask the kids their motivation for using or not using drugs—just whether they did or didn't. For teens, whether a substance is illegal for adults or not is not the key issue. Marijuana use by children is illegal in ALL states. The key issue with kids is availability - can they get it? With legal products, the black market is not as large. You don't see people selling alcohol on the streets, for instance, but that's exactly where teens get their drugs. Legalization has a chance to put the street dealers - who don't ask for an ID card - out of business and reduce availability for kids. This regulated, tightly controlled system can hinder teenage drug use.

**You're an expert on talking to teens about drugs and alcohol. What do you say to them about marijuana?**

My advice about marijuana is always the same as for alcohol and other substances: it's much better in terms of health and development to delay your first use. But let's say they aren't waiting; in that case, kids should learn as much as they can about marijuana. Research it on unbiased websites. It's not true that it's all good or all bad. It's not harmless, but it's not proven to cause permanent harm to your IQ if you smoke it once. I tell parents to work with kids themselves - teach them to be skeptical and practical. You want to encourage them to reduce the harms - and if they're going to do it, just limit it to once in a while. Don't do it all the time,

don't drive while intoxicated, and understand that intoxication can impair decision making abilities.

**Looking at Colorado and Washington, two states that have recently legalized marijuana for recreational use, is there anything in particular that they have done well - or poorly - to protect addiction or abuse among teens?**

This is all so new, and so much is emerging - it's hard to say right now. Colorado and Washington are still working out the details, so I'm going to hold off on passing judgement. I know that they are grappling with the issue of edibles, though. The industry is taking steps in good faith to keep people safe from overdosing, keeping kids away from edibles that look like candy. It's in the industry's best interest, after all, to package and label products so that people know what they are ingesting and kids can't get it.

Remember, we've always had laws on the books to protect kids from getting ahold of intoxicants. Methadone has to be kept in a locked box in the home. We also know that criminalization of drug use, especially for youth, is bad for everybody. We don't want kids caught up in the criminal justice system. Let's craft legislation that is as protective as it can possibly be, and shifts the way we deal with marijuana in this state. That's the most rational and safe choice we can make for our kids.