**MARIJUANA**

MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Now, we want to turn to a conversation you might be having in your house. For years it's been pretty easy to tell kids just say no to tobacco, to underage drinking, but most especially to illegal drugs. But what do you say now that Washington state and Colorado have legalized some recreational use of marijuana?

We reached out on Facebook to ask about this and here is some of what we heard back. Tammy Debellis of Olympia, Washington wrote, quote, "Trying to explain this to my nine-year-old is hard. I explained benefits for some critically ill patients and adults, if used legally. Probably way above his grade level," unquote.

So how should we talk about these new marijuana laws? And should they change the way we talk to our kids about drugs? For answers we turn now to Dr. Leslie Walker. She is a pediatrician and Chief of Adolescent Medicine at Seattle Children's Hospital. She's also co-chair of the Adolescent Substance Abuse program there, and she's thought a lot about this. And she's with us once again. Dr. Walker, thanks so much for joining us once again.

DR. LESLIE WALKER: Thank you for having me.

MARTIN: I think many people who were paying attention on Election Night might have noted that there was a lot of celebrating in the streets after the law changed. And you are in Washington state. That was going on there too, wasn't it?

WALKER: Oh, yes. They're still celebrating.

(LAUGHTER)

WALKER: Yes. They had a big celebration out by Seattle Center, where the Needle is.

MARTIN: You're worried about this. Tell us briefly why and then we can dig into some of the details.

WALKER: Well, I think one of the things that was really kind of lost in the whole election period was what's going to happen with the kids? What are the messages that they're going to get? You know, at least half of the kids that don't smoke marijuana when they're surveyed say they don't because it's illegal.

You know, so out of that there would probably be a few kids now - to them it's legal. Even though it's not legal till 21 is, you know, they've got the message, it's legal. OK. They don't have to worry about it. And we haven't really addressed how are we going to work with them? How are they going to understand what the risks are and what they're not?

MARTIN: Let's talk about that. Are there health issues related to being exposed to marijuana for young people that are just not the same for older people?

WALKER: There definitely is. One of the reasons why is 'cause kids' brains aren't finished developing yet. And so, you know, you put something like marijuana into the mix of a developing brain and for some kids it's going to be the first time they've had a drug that will cause lifelong addiction for them.

Other kids, they may not be dependent on it but it can, if you use it regularly, decrease your IQ points. And there was a study that came out that actually found that when they looked at people from childhood up to age 38, you know, a lot of them started smoking somewhere between 13, 14.

When they followed those people the ones that continued to smoke in adolescent and earlier in adolescence, they lost an average of seven IQ points. The people that didn't smoke actually gained some points as they got to adulthood. So not only did they lose IQ points but those little extra boosts you might get when you're, you know, entering adulthood, they didn't get that as well. And that's really scary.

MARTIN: Is this different from alcohol? I mean, we tell children, obviously, you know, the law has changed dramatically on when younger people are allowed to have access both to cigarettes and alcohol. I mean, I'm dating myself here but I remember being in high school there were actually designated smoking areas for students and you could actually smoke cigarettes with your parents' permission.

And that is certainly no longer the case. Is it different from cigarettes and alcohol? Is marijuana different in that respect?

WALKER: The thing about alcohol is people think it's OK now but actually alcoholism is a very big problem in our country. And the younger people begin, the earlier they go on their trail to being an alcoholic. And, you know, they don't ever attain the level of maturity and their place in society that they would have, had they not started using as a child.

People do say that here. Well, you know, it's fine. Everybody's doing it. It's available. It's like alcohol. But it is like alcohol in that sense. And we haven't done a really good job of figuring out how to monitor the advertising and selling and, you know, it remains to be seen.

MARTIN: I think it's part of the problem that in this country we just don't do a good job of talking about mood altering substances period.

WALKER: Yeah. I think too, you know, when you talk about true dependence and addiction that happens to about 15 percent of people for any drug, you know, across the board. But those 15 percent take up a whole lot of our resources. And then there's that whole other group when you're talking about kids that have, you know, they don't finish school.

You know, they have a lot of trouble. Early pregnancy. You know, there's a lot of things that happen to kids when they're using that, you know, they don't have to be addicted to it.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us I'm talking with pediatrician Dr. Leslie Walker. We're talking about how parents can talk to their children about marijuana, especially in states where it's been legalized. Let me play a clip from Jude Riley of Seattle, Washington, also somebody who we were able to reach through Facebook. And this is what she told her 13-year-old son after the law passed.

JUDE RILEY: He will have choices in life. He can watch too much TV, play too many video games. He will have times when people around him are drinking or using drugs and he will have to choose. Hopefully, knowing that many people do not choose but just follow, or don't moderate their behavior, will help him to know that he does have a choice.

MARTIN: I think this mom is saying that you've got to take the same approach to marijuana as you would to legal substances like alcohol and tobacco, which is that you just have to learn what's good for you and what's in your best interest.

WALKER: One of the things that I think is good about this is that it has gotten people talking that maybe weren't talking specifically about marijuana. But what is extremely important is to be very concrete with kids. If you believe that they shouldn't be using drugs and alcohol, you have to say I don't want you to use alcohol and marijuana. It doesn't matter what's going on around outside the house. These are the rules for our house.

And these are the consequences for its use. It has to be very clear. If that's not clear then the kids interpret it's OK to use.

MARTIN: What about, turning the tables here, to parents who want to smoke in front of their kids?

WALKER: Well, you know, modeling is real important for parents. When a parent does drink alcohol and the kids see, oh, she's stressed out, she's going to get a glass of wine. Oh, Dad has, you know, come home and he's tired and he's going to get a glass of wine to wind down. Oh, Mom's at home smoking some marijuana. It helps her mellow out.

Kids learn those messages and those are very powerful messages. And, you know, we know a lot of kids drink. They drink very early on. It's accessible like marijuana is. And kids have a lot of trouble with alcohol. Some parents make the decision when their kids are adolescent to decrease the alcohol or get rid of the alcohol or lock up the alcohol in their home.

You know, they really try to model the kind of behavior they hope their kids would have.

MARTIN: But some people say, well, instead of kind of walling it off you should show kids that the way alcohol is best enjoyed is with food. What about marijuana? Is there something comparable to that that you could point to for people who say that they're going to smoke anyway because they think it's perfectly harmless? And in fact, some people would say it's less harmful than alcohol.

WALKER: Yeah. People do say that. But we know that there's carcinogens in it. We know that the smoke is not good to breathe in. You know, people need to think about it. If you wouldn't smoke cigarettes in front of your kids in your home because you know of the dangers, you shouldn't somehow think that marijuana is going to be better.

Outside of the social messages it gives, it's probably and very likely harmful to do in the presence of children.

MARTIN: What about the argument that marijuana is a gateway drug that could lead to more dangerous addictions? Is that substantively true? And is that argument now off the table because if it's a legal drug then presumably at some point it'll be regulated? You aren't as connected to the street culture as you would be otherwise if you were buying it on the black market, as it were.

WALKER: Yeah. For kids they still will be buying it on the black market. You know, it won't be legal for them to get marijuana in this state and Colorado. You know, I do think gateway, sometimes, I think gives people the impression that those drugs are not as dangerous as other drugs. And marijuana is the number one drug that kids use that gets them into rehab.

That is the number one drug. It's not heroin. It's not cocaine or, you know, methamphetamine or ecstasy. We hear about those drugs. Kids are using them but extremely small amounts. You know, some kids will use that and that's the only drug they use and that's the one that causes them to drop out of school, have trouble at home, need mental health care.

Other kids may use a different drug. We try to get away a little bit now from the gateway of thinking about drugs because even, you know, alcohol and marijuana can have devastating consequences to a child and their family.

MARTIN: And finally, I just want to read an email that was similar to a couple that we got from Lindsay Connors(ph) from Fort Collins who said, look, many people in our state smoke marijuana whether it's legal or not. Why should we spend money putting those people in jail? Plus the state will tax it like groceries or alcohol and hopefully that money will go to schools. Simplistic, but it works, this is the message that she said that she gave to her eight-year-old son.

And I'm interested on your take on that.

WALKER: Yeah. I think we need to have more discussions about what this really means. I think that that didn't happen during the election time and a lot of people felt it was a social justice issue, it was an economic issue. You know, most people don't use marijuana. You know, it may seem like it, even the kids. The vast majority of kids are not using marijuana at this time.

You know, it'll be a natural experiment to see what happens over the next three years.

MARTIN: Dr. Leslie Walker is a pediatrician and chief of adolescent medicine at Seattle Children's Hospital. She was with us from member station KUOW. Dr. Walker, thanks so much for joining us.

WALKER: Thank you very much.