Prevention in Action: How Medfield Outreach and MCAP Work to Protect and Empower Youth

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Medfield Outreach is the Town of Medfield's official social services department committed to supporting the community's residents with counseling, case management, and connecting individuals and families with resources. The department also oversees two coalitions that focus on prevention and public health: the Medfield Coalition for Suicide Prevention (MCSP) and Medfield Cares About Prevention (MCAP). These coalitions extend the reach of Medfield Outreach by engaging the wider community in addressing the critical issues of suicide prevention and youth substance use.

MCAP brings together parents, students, educators, health professionals, and town leaders to prevent youth substance use, promote mental health, and encourage positive decision-making. Its mission is to foster a healthy, safe environment for young people through education, awareness, and collaborative community action.

In 2019, MCAP received a five-year Drug-Free Communities (DFC) grant, a federal funding initiative supported by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This funding has enabled MCAP to expand its prevention programs, deepen community partnerships, and support a dedicated Substance Use Prevention Coordinator to lead local efforts. In 2024, the coalition reapplied and was awarded another five years of funding (extending until 2029). These continued funds will help the coalition to sustain meaningful and important collaboration with the Medfield community, especially Medfield youth.

In fact, youth engagement remains at the heart of MCAP's work through the Medfield Youth Leadership Program (MYLP). This youth coalition empowers high school students to lead peer-focused prevention efforts and develop leadership skills. Recently, the coalition has been proud to support MCAP intern and Medfield High School student Lina Gatti in the creation of an animation that educates peers about the risks of youth marijuana use.

As conversations around teen marijuana use grow, MCAP works to raise awareness of the associated risk factors, such as academic pressure, early access, and social influences, as well as the importance of protective factors like family support, healthy coping skills, and community connectedness. Research shows that marijuana use during adolescence can have lasting effects on brain development, mental health, and future success.[1] The adolescent brain is still developing until around the age of 25, and areas responsible for decision-making, impulse

[1] Green, K. M., Doherty, E. E., & Ensminger, M. E. (2016). Long-term consequences of adolescent cannabis use: Examining intermediary processes. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, *43*(5), 567–575. https://doi.org/10.1080/00952990.2016.1258706

control, and emotional regulation tend to be vulnerable to certain substances. THC, the psychoactive component of marijuana, can disrupt this development in these sectors of the brain.[2] Research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) indicates that marijuana use in teens may alter brain structure and function, leading to long-term cognitive impairments.[3] There is also a strong link between adolescent marijuana use and mental health issues. Regular use has been associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. While some youth may use marijuana to cope with emotional distress, evidence shows that it often worsens underlying mental health conditions.

Data from the most recent Metrowest Adolescent Health Survey (MWAHS, 2023) indicates that these issues are still relevant in Medfield, reinforcing the need for proactive prevention strategies. The survey indicated that 20% of Medfield High School (MHS) seniors are currently using marijuana. Risk factors for youth marijuana use could include early access or exposure in the home, lack of clear parental expectations, lack of engagement in school or extra-curriculars, pre-existing mental health challenges and high levels of stress without healthy coping skills. Those who fall under one or more of these categories are at a higher risk of beginning early usage of marijuana. It was reported that 63% of MHS seniors thought it would be "fairly easy" or "very easy" for them to obtain marijuana (MWAHS, 2023) which is why prevention work and limiting access is important when it comes to keeping our youth safe.

Parents and caregivers play a vital role in prevention. Open conversations, clear expectations, safe storage of substances that may be in the home, and involvement in community programs are powerful tools to help guide youth toward healthy decisions.

If you're interested in making a difference, MCAP always welcomes new members. Join us in building a stronger, healthier Medfield by supporting youth and fostering a community where prevention is everyone's responsibility. Call Medfield Outreach at 508-359-7121, or email medfieldoutreach@medfield.net to join today!

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[2] Burggren, A. C., Shirazi, A., Ginder, N., & London, E. D. (2019). Cannabis effects on brain structure, function, and cognition: considerations for medical uses of cannabis and its derivatives. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, *45*(6), 563–579. https://doi.org/10.1080/00952990.2019.1634086

[3] *Brain structure differences are associated with early use of substances among adolescents | National Institute on Drug Abuse*. (2024, December 30). National Institute on Drug Abuse. https://nida.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/2024/12/brain-structure-differences-are-associated-with-early-use-of-substances-among-adolescents