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Perspective: From marijuana to mushrooms

On Aug. 26, The Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Safety Center released alarming news: Young people are the top users of psychedelics, and most use the drugs simply for fun. The center also reported that the most widely used psychedelic was psilocybin — the slang term is “magic mushrooms” — and that it was perceived to improve mental health.

Two days later, state regulators gathered from the governor’s office, the Department of Natural Medicine (housed in the Department of Revenue), the Department of Regulatory Agencies and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to engage in a “listening session.” The officials sought feedback largely from those participating in the business of rolling out the psychedelic “healing centers” permitted under Colorado’s Proposition 122.

The listening session focused primarily on the purported benefits of the program. Discussion of the drugs’ unintended physical and mental health consequences, however, was noticeably absent. The loudest voices in the room were those with a financial stake — voicing concerns about rules and costs under the regulations adopted after Proposition 122’s approval on the statewide ballot in 2022.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because we’ve seen the playbook before. Many of the lawyers from the cannabis industry, who helped it grow after pot’s legalization for recreational use in 2012, are now deeply involved in the psychedelics-for-profit world and are poised as other psychoactive drugs become mainstream.

This should give us pause. While voters approved decriminalization, home grows, and state-licensed “healing centers” to administer psychedelics under Proposition 122, where in the state process is the concern for the impact on children, families and communities? When regulators and elected officials prioritize industry interests over public health, kids ultimately pay the price.

Our organization, One Chance to Grow Up, has spent years tracking the unintended consequences of marijuana commercialization on children and young people.

We have watched an “arms race” to increase THC potency that continues to derail the lives of countless young people.

Consider the recent study published in the Annals of Internal Medicine by world-class scientists from the University of Colorado’s School of Public Health on the impacts of high-concentration cannabis. The research concluded that high-concentration THC products are associated with unfavorable mental health outcomes, particularly for psychosis, schizophrenia and Cannabis Use Disorder.

According to the Colorado Department of Health and Environment’s Violent Death Reporting System, 32.6% of Colorado teens 15-18 years old who died by suicide in 2023 had THC in their system at the time of their death. For Hispanic teens in that age range, the number climbed to 57.1%. For Black teens who died by suicide between 2020-2023, it was 26.7%.

Now, the new wave of psychedelic commercialization feels like the next chapter of the same story. We are deeply concerned that Colorado’s psychedelic regulatory scheme is opening the door to many of the same public health, safety and education gaps.

Yes, psychedelic research is underway by the FDA to explore potential benefits. Proposition 122 was sold to Colorado’s voting public as a way for sufferers of disorders such as PTSD to cope. Afflicted veterans often were used as the sympathetic face of the campaign. The supposed benefits of hallucinogens in treating mental health issues were widely touted by Proposition 122’s campaign, which was well funded from outside our state.

Yet, the limited research into using psychedelics to treat serious mental health conditions, if anything, raises doubts about their efficacy. Last year, a key advisory committee of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration found that the proposed use of the hallucinogen MDMA, pitched by pharmaceutical giant Lykos Therapeutics, is not an effective PTSD treatment after all.

Whatever medical science eventually concludes about the claims of psychedelics’ therapeutic value in treating mental and emotional disorders, there is a vast difference between research conducted in controlled clinical settings — and Colorado’s profit-driven “healing centers.” It’s important to note that there is no diagnosis required by any medical clinician to trip in a healing center.

As a parent of a child with a seizure disorder, I understand the desperation for effective treatments. If marijuana had been the only option to stop seizures for my child, I would have done whatever it took. But that’s a far cry from commercializing unproven drugs and exposing the public — especially kids — to unnecessary risk.

The state’s public education pamphlet, “Know the Law,” barely scratches the surface. There is no mention that psilocybin remains a federally controlled substance. What about the potential mental and physical harms of these powerful psychedelics? How long does the drug impair judgment? When is it safe to drive? Parents and the public deserve evidence-based facts.

While psychedelics are not sold in dispensaries as marijuana is, the state has approved the commercial manufacturing of psychedelic edibles, and it should come as no surprise that other products and methods of intake will be coming down the pike. The state's recently adopted rules in fact allow psychedelic mushrooms to be consumed in various forms — as whole mushrooms, teas, capsules, tablets and tinctures, and also as chocolates and gummies. Which means that, as with superpotent THC concentrates from marijuana, hallucinogens come in forms sure to lure curious kids.

What happens when a facilitator takes a psychedelics-laced edible off-site to a state permitted home session? What happens if a 3-year-old mistakes a chocolate treat containing psilocybin for candy? We don't know — and that should alarm all of us.

One bright spot: the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment has finally been invited into the discussion, and the Board of Health has expressed serious concerns. But unless they are given real decision-making authority, it might be too little, too late.

Colorado youth are experimenting. According to the 2023 statewide youth survey, 3.8% of high schoolers report having tried psychedelics. Without honest, accessible education for parents and trusted adults, how can we protect kids from the risks?

Even if there is merit in researching psychedelics in clinical settings for any possible therapeutic value, there must be safeguards for families and communities against Colorado's healing-center regulatory scheme.

The Board of Health should have stronger oversight of the regulatory process and demand that the state invest in real, evidence-based public education before commercialization outpaces safety.

After all, Colorado kids only get one chance to grow up. Colorado shouldn't gamble with their future.

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Henny Lasley is co-founder and executive director of One Chance To Grow Up. One Chance is in its 13th year of protecting kids from today's marijuana and emerging substances through transparency, education, empowerment and policy.

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One Chance to Grow Up protects kids from THC through transparency, education, empowerment, and policy. We don't take sides on the politics of legalization but instead serve as a reliable resource for parents, media, policymakers, and all who care about kids. Started by concerned parents, we're a 501(c)(3) nonprofit supported by charitable contributions.

