

A Parent's Worst Nightmare

How High-THC Pot Killed My Son and How to Keep It from Happening to You

By Laura Stack



Thank you for being one of Johnny's Ambassadors!

As a thank you, here is a "sneak-peek" of my new book. *A Parent's Worst Nightmare* will tell the story of my son Johnny's marijuana addiction, mental illness, and ultimate suicide at the age of 19. The adolescent psychosis and suicide epidemic is spiraling out of control, and we must shine a light on high-THC pot before we lose more young lives.

The book will be written as a mass market book targeted toward parents and grandparents of children, teenagers, and young adults ages 12-24. It's not a "Christian" book per se, in that it won't contain heavy scriptural references, but it will weave in a message of Christian faith (so as not to be discounted by Christians). The book will contain research, photos, and Johnny's writing, as well as medical, coroner, toxicology, and mental hospital reports to support the claim we've opened Pandora's box with the evolution of marijuana.

The format will weave in stories, with some of Johnny's actual words from his journal and school work, and conversations between Johnny and us. The book's tone will be anti-pot, but it's not a scientific study on causation; rather, it's a siren call to parents, preteens, teens, families, and educators on the mental health and behavioral health challenges facing our youth today.

The book is for those parents who don't know what today's marijuana is like, or they think it's safe because they did it, their kids are doing it at home, or it's just like alcohol. The book communicates to youth—it's just not worth the risk—and to parents—it's worth risking everything to save your child from this dragon. Parents need to be parents, not friends.

It is my prayer that *A Parent's Worst Nightmare* is both compelling...and terrifying.

Book Summary

My cell phone rang at 1:03 AM on Thursday, November 20, 2019, and I woke with a start. I always kept my ringtone volume on full blast, so I would be sure to awaken to Johnny's late-night calls. I reached over to pick up the phone, fully expecting to see Johnny's name on the screen, and instead, it said Douglas County Sheriff's Office. I answered, "Hello?" and the voice said, "Hello, ma'am, this is (officer name) with the Douglas County Sheriff's Office. I'm at your front door. Will you please come down?" I replied, slightly irritated, "Do you have Johnny with you?" and he said, "No, ma'am. I'm sorry—I do not." A cold chill went through my veins. I rolled over and woke up my husband, John, and told him, "The police are at the door. It's Johnny." He jumped out of bed, and we threw on robes. We hurried downstairs and opened the door. A lone police officer in uniform was standing there, along with a woman in a black shirt and pants. We let them in and led them into the living room, where we intuitively knew we should sit down. The woman in black said, "Mr. and Mrs. Stack, I'm with the coroner's office. I'm so sorry to tell you that your son is deceased." I blinked, stared at her for a few seconds, not quite comprehending what I'd heard. I felt John's grip on my hand tighten. I asked, "Deceased? What do you mean, deceased?" "He's dead, ma'am," she said. "He jumped off the six-story RTD parking garage on Park Meadows Drive." I screamed and fell into John's arms, sobbing. I was now living every parent's worst nightmare.

Johnny Stack was born on February 7, 2000, to John and Laura Stack of Highlands Ranch, CO. In 2014, when he was 14 years old, recreational marijuana use in Colorado was legalized, and the dealers came out in force to our middle and high schools. It was everywhere and easy to get.

Johnny was a happy, funny, handsome, talented child, who was fiercely loved and constantly cared for. He was extremely intelligent (e.g., he received a perfect score on the math portion of the SAT). He loved animals, video games, Jesus, school, the beach, his friends, and his family. He was a brown belt in karate, ran cross country, went to youth group and church, had a great singing voice, took swimming lessons, volunteered, attended summer camps, and played the piano. He had a 4.0 GPA (until his last semester of high school) and a scholarship to college. Bottom line, he was a perfectly normal boy with a wonderful life and a bright future ahead of him. And he killed himself when he was 19 years old.

How can this possibly happen?

On Sunday, November 17, 2019 around 5:30 PM, Johnny comes over for dinner. (He lived in our condo a couple miles down the street and would often pop in for a home-cooked meal.) He's a bit agitated but lucid. "I need to tell you that you were right," he tells me. "Right about what?" I asked. "Right about the marijuana and the drugs. You told me weed would hurt my brain, and it's ruined my mind and my life. I'm sorry, and I love you." He died by suicide three days later.

Johnny dabbled for many years, starting at the age of 14 or 15, until his death at age 19. When I said "dabbled" in the previous sentence, did you know what I meant? Not everyone does. I didn't fully understand it all until recently. "Dabbled" is not a typo. I didn't mean "dabble," as in take part in a casual way. I don't mean dabbling as in the dance move. "Dabbing" is a verb that means to heat a sticky oil or wax of concentrated THC extracted from cannabis and inhale the vapors. "What?" you might be thinking.

Don't worry—*most* Boomers and Gen Xers do not understand the difference between smoking marijuana (flower) and using high-THC extracts, edibles, and concentrates such as nectar, carts, wax, honey, Butane Hash Oil (BHO), shatter, or budder (not a typo). When I explain what dabbing is, most of my friends look at me blankly and say, "I've never even heard about this," or "Everything you just said sounds like Greek."

If you don't know what cannabis extracts are, and you have children, grandchildren, sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews between the ages of 12 and 24, this book is for you.

As a young teen, Johnny experienced some social anxiety about making friends and had a few panic attacks when giving presentations in front of a class, which we successfully managed with prescription medications and therapy. He would have been just fine and grown out of it like most do. But then he had "that friend" who convinced him to try pot, and the problems began.

Let's be clear, in case you or a loved one uses marijuana successfully for medical purposes, or you are an adult over 21 years old and use recreational marijuana, this isn't about you, so please don't get defensive about my son dying. If you're an adult, and marijuana helps the pain from your cancer, I'm not arguing that it helps you. If you want to get high—hey, it's your brain and your life—you're an adult, so do what you want.

*I'm specifically talking about **illegal** use of THC by children and young adults under 21, whose adolescent brains are still forming.*

You may be thinking, "C'mon, Laura, it's no big deal – it's just pot." "Pot's legal, so it must be safe." Or "I did pot when I was a kid, too, and look, it didn't hurt me."

Well, have you recently studied TODAY'S pot, and have you personally seen its effects on your children like I have? The pot of the past is not the pot of today.

Why is it so different? Mostly, the potency and the products. First, the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive active ingredient in cannabis that gives the "high," is extracted out of the cannabis using solvents and chemicals from the raw plant. Most commonly, propane, butane, CO2, ethanol, and ice water are added to plant marijuana, mixing it in industrial mixers and extracting the "pure" THC molecules (it kind of looks like crystalline beeswax or paste). Dabs are 70-90% THC and full of solvents as well, the exposure to which could also damage the brain. Even the "flower" or "grass" formats have been modified to have higher levels of THC than ever before. Pot is now a chemist's game, not a farmer's.

A vape pen or a large "rig" (google it) is used to vaporize the concentrated dabs with a blowtorch or heat gun. Forget the paper joints that we rolled in the 70s and 80s. The pot we grew up with (10% or less THC content) is HUGELY different than today's high-concentrate extracts (90% THC content or higher).

High-THC products have a dramatic effect on brain chemistry and the body in a very strong, rapid, and often dangerous way. Many teens do not even know what they are smoking the first time they smoke 'dabs' and may feel overwhelmed by being "too high," unable to move or function for hours. Still others will initially enjoy the intense 'high' but then experience severe psychiatric symptoms such as extreme paranoia, which often result in high-risk behaviors. Johnny would drive high, for example. Once he was

so high at his psychologist's office that they refused to let him leave and held him there for two hours under threat of calling the police.

I hope I'm painting a clear picture that the mild, laid-back high you might picture with your past pot use as a teen is not the reality of many of today's marijuana products or methods. It's far from "natural." It's like crack weed. Like creating heroin from opioids. Like drinking a gallon of Everclear instead of drinking a beer. And over time, with high-frequency and high-potency use, it's poisonous to your child's brain.

The brain is still developing through a person's 20s, and psychotic disorders typically develop in the late teenage years. During brain formation, heavy cannabis use has been shown to have a negative effect on the formation of neural pathways (all citations here will be provided). It can also lead to heavier drug use. While most marijuana smokers never experience permanent mental illness, researchers have found that the earlier and heavier someone starts dabbing, the more likely it is that they will develop a disorder at some point (often years later).

The harmful combination of a still-forming mind, high-potency THC products, and a high frequency of use = Cannabis-Induced Psychosis (CIP). Yes, that's a real diagnosis, or it can be called High-THC Abuse – Severe. Repeated CIP incidents can trigger schizophrenia or other mental illnesses such as bipolar, and even when the cannabis is withdrawn, the psychosis doesn't go away. This is what happened to my beautiful boy. After multiple psychotic episodes from weeks of daily dabbing, he was forced to stop dabbing in the mental hospital due to lack of availability. But it was too late. His brain didn't heal.

When Johnny died, he was having an acute paranoid schizophrenic episode. His brain turned on him and told him lies. In his journal, he wrote that the mob was after him, his former university was an FBI base, and "the whole world knew everything about him." So, he jumped off a six-story building in an impulsive act of fear and desperation.

The toxicology report showed he had ZERO drugs in his system. He wasn't depressed, neglected, drugged, or unloved. He was psychotic, paranoid, and delusional by the time he reached 19, and he refused the anti-psychotic drugs that he now desperately needed, because he thought he wasn't sick (common to schizophrenia).

Dr. David Rettew, MD, from Burlington, VT, who specializes in Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, stated in a recorded public town hall forum on January 29, 2020 (URLs will be provided), "Marijuana is the substance with the biggest gap between the perceived and actual level of harm." He personally sees how cases of Cannabis Induced Psychosis (CIP) causes psychotic thinking, paranoia, delusions, and hallucinations. He says people can recover from these episodes, but if they don't see the link between the psychosis and the pot and go back to smoking, one day, their brains don't bounce back any more. This is what happened to Johnny. He says 34% who become psychotic while using marijuana convert to schizophrenia. He also points out the higher risk of suicide, which is at least triple for young cannabis users. He says the evidence that cannabis is bad for the brain is quite strong, going beyond simple association studies that strengthen the case for causality. It's just not worth the risk for teens to dab any amount!

It's so easy to think that marijuana use isn't that big of a deal, especially since some states have begun legalizing the drug for recreational use. I'm from Colorado, where suicide is the #1 cause of death for youth and young adults ages 10-14, #3rd cause for residents ages 15-44, and #7 cause of death overall. To prevent suicide, we must identify those at risk and connect them with help before they reach the

point of a suicidal crisis. 21% of suicides under 20 years of age had THC in their toxicology reports, and that doesn't even count the ones who had no THC in their system but were psychotic because of it.

Marijuana isn't addicting in the same way cocaine and heroin are, as those drugs create a chemical dependency. Weed's addictive nature has more to do with serotonin, which is the natural chemical in our brains that produces happiness. Basically, the THC in marijuana creates an artificial creation of happiness. Once you come off the high, the "happy juice" is depleted, and your body needs time to produce more. Depression, irritability, irrational behavioral, or anxiousness may ensue. You might perceive your child as being "on edge." This cycle is what happens to a habitual user, and they need their fix.

Johnny was able to buy Adderall pills for \$1 each from a high school friend, and he told me they helped him study. We took him to his psychiatrist at the time, who looked at his Genomind test and said Johnny absolutely didn't have ADD but was using them to get high. So, we conducted daily backpack, room, and car searches to make sure he didn't take it. The book will also explore the relationship, if any, with ADD/ADHD as serotonin-related drugs in treating those conditions. Do kids with those conditions gravitate more toward weed to get that serotonin high without the side-effects of the meds (like an instant gratification).

And it's not just children who can have psychotic episodes from THC, by the way. I have a girlfriend, age 51, who took two hits on a dab pan and hallucinated in a mental hospital for three weeks. But if you're legal and over 21, it's your life and your brain. Where we MUST step in as adults is to prevent the illegal usage of it by children and young adults.

As more states move to legalize recreational marijuana, we have a youth suicide epidemic on our hands. Certain Democratic candidates have promised if they are elected president, they will legalize it nationwide.

At young ages, teens are fed a "cure for all" misconception and start the slippery slope of addiction. Then they neglect to seek other treatment or proper medication. Then get the idea that if this can't fix me, then I'm unfixable. And that's furthest from the truth.

Parents need to be aware of the dangers cannabis-derived drugs pose to their children's mental health and educate them as early as possible— when they are as young as 10-12 years old. We must use hyper-vigilance in the early teen years. They may be dabbing under your nose and tell you they are "vaping." Do you know what they are sucking on? We found that once Johnny had a car and driving, even though we tracked his car and his phone, it was much more difficult to monitor him. We couldn't lock him up or watch him 24/7. Remember, you are your child's parent; you are not a friend. You must do room, car, and backpack searches, confiscate what you find, set boundaries and discipline, and get them help. Keep talking and keep trying!

I am compelled to help increase awareness about dabbing and prevent more senseless deaths, especially those under 18, who are still in high school and middle school, while their parents still have legal control over them. Once 18, a young adult can remove legal permission for a parent to communicate with any doctors or schools.

Pandora's box has been opened!

Who is Johnny's Mom?

Laura Stack has the undesired wisdom of knowing what it's like to lose one's child. She hopes to help other parents keep it from happening to them by sharing Johnny's story honestly and boldly. Laura believes saving lives would be a potentially positive outcome to her great tragedy. Laura is determined to start a social movement to bring teen drug use, mental illness, and suicide out of the darkness.

Laura's expertise gives her the unique position to write this book:

- 28-year entrepreneur of www.TheProductivityPro.com
- Hall of Fame keynote speaker
- Author of eight books by major publishers
- Experienced media authority
- Experienced with obtaining high-level sponsors
- Large existing community of followers
- Parent of suicide

Laura has filed for a 501c3 non-profit determination for her Foundation, Johnny's Ambassadors. We will build out the website www.StopTeenSuicidebyPot.org (and .com redirect). The Foundation will bring education, awareness, and prevention curriculum to parents and middle/high schools students to raise awareness of THC use, mental illness, and suicide, as well as reduce the stigma of using proper anxiety and depression medications instead of trying pot.

Laura will speak (live and virtual), create curriculum, film videos, secure partners, and gather a community to share Johnny's and others' stories.

This problem MUST be addressed immediately, before any more children die the same senseless death Johnny did. I pray Johnny's story is a wake-up call to parents and teenagers who think it can't happen to them. By sharing Johnny's story, we can work together to decrease the stigma and provide critical education to stop the teen suicide epidemic by pot. This book will be the centerpiece of this social movement.

[Please visit our site if you wish to contribute to our mission.](#)