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THE SOCIAL NORMS INTERVENTION





WHY?

In substance use prevention

MESSAGES MATTER.

When youth are exposed to messages that explain the positive, true norms that most youth make healthy choices and engage in prosocial activities, they are more likely to take part in those positive behaviors.



THE POWER OF SOCIAL NORMS ON PERSONAL BEHAVIOR

Research shows that a growing percentage, and the vast majority, of American youth are **choosing not to use any substances**.

Yet both youth and adults overwhelmingly overestimate the number of 12–18-year-olds who use substances (especially alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana). They believe that substance use is more common than it actually is (e.g., everyone drinks, most caregivers let their kids drink). The truth is that most youth make healthy choices and do not use substances.

The Problem with Misunderstanding True Norms

- Humans are group oriented and largely influenced by, and conform to, peer norms. In fact, **the perception of the peer norm is one of the strongest predictors of personal behavior**.
- Misperceptions of norms almost always overestimate the prevalence of a problem and underestimate the solution. For this reason, people tend to believe that youth substance use is more prevalent than it is, and that solutions are rare.
- **When people think substance use is the norm, they are more likely to make choices that align with that misperception** (i.e., acceptance or promotion of alcohol use). They also tend to hide or diminish their own healthy behaviors.
- These findings have been replicated across the nation, age levels, and subpopulations of youth.

The Solution: Translating Social Norms Theory into Prevention Strategies

- **When youth are exposed to messages that explain the positive, true norms that most youth make healthy choices and engage in prosocial activities, they are more likely to take part in those positive behaviors.**
- Across all communication strategies, social norm approaches have the strongest evidence base for upstream prevention communications!
- The social norms intervention looks like this:

Baseline Intervention

Identify true and misperceived norms

Intervention

Intensive exposure to true norm messages

Post-Intervention

Less exaggerated misperception of norms

Predicted Result

Less harmful or risky behavior

WHO ARE SOCIAL NORMS INTERVENTIONS INTENDED FOR?

EVERYONE! Social norms interventions have been effective preventing initiation of use and stopping use in those who are experimenting.

Youth using substances experimentally often do so because they think it's the norm. Therefore, when presented with the true positive norm, they respond towards reduction of use. Even heavy users tend to moderate or abandon their prior use.





IDENTIFYING TRUE AND MISPERCEIVED NORMS

Two main types of norms that are used in social norms interventions: descriptive and injunctive.

Descriptive Norms

Descriptive norms refer to how people in a group **actually behave or are perceived to behave** (e.g., how many youth use substances or are believed to use substances).

Injunctive Norms

Injunctive norms refer to how people in a group **feel or believe** that others ought to behave (e.g., whether youth disapprove or condone of peers using substances).

Both injunctive and descriptive norms influence behavior. At any given time, there is more descriptive norm data available to practitioners than injunctive norm data.

DESCRIPTIVE NORMS ABOUT YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE

A **true descriptive norm** represents the number of youth who do and do not engage in substance use (e.g., 25% of students drink or do drugs. 75% of students do not drink or do drugs.) A **perceived descriptive norm** refers to the number of youth that are believed to be engaging in substance use (e.g., students believe that 50% of their peers drink or do drugs).

When there is a mismatch between the true and perceived norm, a social norms intervention can be delivered to change misperceptions and ultimately reduce youth substance use.

In social norms interventions, it is helpful to identify descriptive norms that describe **how the intended audience makes the decision not to engage in substance use and how they spend their time instead**. These protective practices, healthy beliefs, and safe behaviors are true norms that represent a “solution” which can be built into norm messages (e.g., 75% of students do not drink or do drugs. Instead, they choose healthy activities like sports, movies, and game nights when hanging out with their friends). The goal of presenting a solution is to reinforce and encourage engagement in healthy ways of thinking and being.

Where to Find Social Norms Data

The impact of a social norms intervention is heavily influenced by whether youth find the messaging to be **credible** and **relevant** to them. In searching for social norms data, a few common sources of local/regional data include:

- The bi-annual Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) which provides estimates of substance use for 9th - 12th grades at national, state, territorial, tribal, and local school district levels. Visit page 50 of the [Substance Use Prevention Communications Toolkit](#) for a quick guide on accessing YRBSS data.
- Regional substance use estimates might be available in a community health assessment (sometimes called a community health needs assessment).
- Local coalitions and school district offices sometimes administer student substance use surveys. Reach out to these entities in your community to see if they any relevant data they can share.
- If you have a national sample or want to pair local with national data, the annual Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey offers national estimates of substance use and related attitudes among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders.



COLLECTING NORMS DATA

Creating norm messages that reflect current and relatable true norms is critical to the success of a social norm intervention.

It is often the case that existing instruments do not ask the kinds of questions necessary for a social norms intervention. When no publicly available norm data can be identified, this information can be collected directly from a sample of your intended audience.

Key data to gather from the intended audience includes:

- Substance use and protective behaviors and attitudes,
- Perceptions of peers' typical behaviors and attitudes, and
- Exposure to social norm messages.

SAMPLE MEASUREMENTS

Substance use and protective behaviors and attitudes:

- "Have you consumed more than a few sips of alcohol in the [past month/school year]?"
- "When hanging out or socializing with friends, what do you typically drink?"
Response options: water; sports drink; pop/soda; juice; tea; coffee; alcohol; and other.
- "When spending time with your friends, what, if anything, have you done to avoid drinking alcohol?" Response options: avoid parties where students drink, leave a party if others start to drink, avoid the drinkers, etc.

Perceptions of peers' typical behaviors and attitudes:

- "When hanging out or socializing with friends, what do you think a typical student at your school drinks?" Response options: water; sports drink; pop/soda; juice; tea; coffee; alcohol; and other.
- "It is wrong for people my age to drink beer or wine."
- "The typical student at my school believes that it is wrong for people their age to use marijuana products."

Exposure to social norm messages:

Measuring exposure to social norms measurements at baseline and again post-intervention is critical to determining the impact of the intervention. Ask,

- "About how many times during this school year have you seen or heard information stating that most students at your school do not drink alcohol (or: do not use nicotine, use marijuana, etc.)?"

Common Data Collection Approaches

Survey

A questionnaire can be developed to gather the essential social norm measures explained above. Surveys can be administered in many ways, from paper-pencil to web-based to personal interview.

Two main strategies for getting surveys completed and the choice you make will depend on resources available to support the social norms intervention.

- **Census survey.** A census survey samples the entire population aiming to gather information from the entire intended audience.
- **Opportunistic survey.** An opportunistic survey samples a convenient and accessible sample from the intended population. While easier than a census survey, the information collected may not as accurately reflect the intended audience. However, such a convenient sample can still be useful for message development as long as there is a credible citation for this data.

Focus Group

A planned discussion can be had with a sample of the intended audience to collect information on the social norms measures being collected.

This approach can be used to sample specific and/or hard-to-reach segments of the intended audience, or to gather more information as a follow up to a survey.

Focus groups are also often used to test social norms messages, determine media channels, and identify message delivery sites before the intervention begins.

Collecting your own norm data offers you an opportunity to gather baseline measurements before the social norms intervention begins. These same measurements can be re-administered following the intervention to evaluate the impact of the intervention.

When developing a data collection tool, consider what additional variables would be helpful to measure before and after your intervention that align with your goals and objectives. For instance, if your intervention goal includes a reduction of the negative consequences associated with youth substance use, then include these measurements at both baseline and post-intervention.

Consider securing the assistance of someone with data collection and analysis skills to support the data collection and evaluation processes.



For more information on **Collecting Norm Data**, including determining sample size and sample surveys, see Chapter 2 and Appendices of [A Guide to Marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools & Communities](#). Find an additional sample data collection tools at [The Positive Community Norms Student Survey](#).



DEVELOPING DATA-BASED POSITIVE NORMS MESSAGING

Developing data-based positive norms messaging can correct misperceptions about peer substance use.

You can reframe data to create a positive norm message.

Most norms on substance use are presented as a percent or proportion of youth who are using a substance. Once you have the percent of how many youth are using a particular substance (e.g., 15%), calculate the percent who are not using the substance (e.g., 85%). This number represents the true positive norm, or percent of youth who are not using substances.

Social norms interventions require creating multiple versions of the same topic that integrate both descriptive and injunctive norms.

Descriptive norm messages reflect true descriptive norms and simply describe what the identified population does (or does not do).

- “This year’s school survey found that 8 out of 10 kids in ABC Middle School did not use nicotine, alcohol, or drugs last year.”
- “80% of ABC Middle School students choose to do healthy activities other than drinking when they’re with their friends.”

There are two common approaches for presenting true descriptive norms.

- **Directly challenge misperceptions** of true, positive norms.
 - “9 out of 10 ABC High School Students choose non-alcoholic drinks when they hang out with friends.”
- **Indirectly challenge misperceptions** of true, positive norms without a specific statistic, but describing how the majority of students think or behave.
 - “ABC High School students care about one another...they don’t pressure each other to drink.”
 - “ABC High School students make good choices. Here are the top 10 reasons they gave for not drinking alcohol...”

Direct and indirect challenges can be presented as separate versions of the same message and/or combined into a single message.

Injunctive norm messages explain whether the identified population approves or disapproves of certain behaviors.

- “Most of ABC Middle School students (94%) disapprove of students using marijuana.

Create versions of same norm topic that pair the norm with a solution. Solutions are the protective practices, healthy beliefs, and safe behaviors youth engage in when they choose to not use any substances. These health-oriented solutions integrated into social norms messages promote preventive decision-making by reinforcing and encouraging engagement in healthy ways of thinking and being.

- “After surveying all 10th graders, it looks like 9 out of 10 kids in your grade choose to have fun on the weekends doing healthy activities like going out to dinner and attending school sports games instead of using substances.”



TIPS TO STRENGTHEN THE IMPACT OF YOUR NORM MESSAGES

- Make the true norm message prominent and focal. Avoid distracting text and imagery that takes away from the main message.
- Use language and imagery that reflect the culture of your intended audience. Do not use photos of actual youth in the intended audience group.
- Avoid shock and fear-based messaging and imagery.
- Cite a credible source. Youth are more responsive to messages they see as credible. For example, “This year’s school survey found that 8 out of 10 kids in your grade didn’t use nicotine, alcohol, or drugs last year.”
- Use survey data correctly. Accurately portray the data in a way that will resonate and appeal to the audience. Round numbers to whole numbers (e.g., round 79.7% to 80% or 8/10).
- Avoid prescriptive messages like “do” and “do not” as they undermine the power of the social norms message.
- Prepare multiple versions of the same norm topic that presents the true norm in slightly different ways. Consider combining local with national data in some versions of the message.





DELIVERING POSITIVE NORM MESSAGING

Social norms interventions require a **high dosage of ongoing and intense marketing** of true positive norms.

Aim for achieving these dosage outcomes among your intended audience:

- 80% or more will have seen/heard the intervention messages at least once.
- 50% or more will have seen/heard a positive norm message at least 6 times.

Change messages often (every 2-3 weeks) using different versions of the same norm topic and leveraging multiple message delivery channels.

- **Why?** Youth are exposed to pro-substance use messaging in high frequency. Pairing norm-based messaging via multiple channels (mass communications and conversations) will increase the chances of shifting perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors about substance use.

MESSAGE DELIVERY CHANNELS

Leverage school and community multimedia communication channels to deliver social norms messages:

- Print media (postcards, posters, flyers, yard signs, etc.)
- Electronic media (social media posts, screen savers, etc.)
- School and community broadcasting channels (public service announcements, advertisements, banners, billboard, etc.)
- Swag (mouse pads, pens, notepads, etc.)

Engage in direct marketing (i.e., personal interaction):

- Integrate positive norm-based messages into discussions with youth. These may occur in one-on-one conversations, small group discussions, or presentations to youth such as new student orientations.
- Train credible others who frequently talk with youth (caregivers, teachers, healthcare providers) to deliver social norm messages.
- Keep in mind that social norm messages should be delivered as facts, absent of emotion or judgment, and based on credible evidence.

Curriculum infusion:

- Schools can find ways to build social norm messages into their lessons.



Be Creative and Have Fun!

Make the norm messages interactive.

- Ex: Teachers can wear buttons or lanyards representing a true social norm percentage. This encourages youth to ask questions about what the number represents.
- Ex: Create quizzes or contests for youth that present the true norm message.

Post norm messages in places youth often frequent. This may include cafeterias, school bathroom stalls, athletic venues, and community parks.



EVALUATING SOCIAL NORMS INTERVENTIONS

To study the impact of your social norms intervention it is important to evaluate both how the intervention was created and delivered (i.e., **the process**) and the impact the intervention had in changing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (i.e., **the outcome**).

MEASURING PROCESS

Reach

The proportion of the intended population who received the intervention.

Exposure

How many times the message was received (e.g., dosage delivered, dosage received).

Comprehension

Whether those exposed to the intervention understood the message as it was intended.

Contamination

The extent to which outside factors or interventions may have influenced the effectiveness of the intervention. This could include simultaneous prevention interventions or pro-substance use media campaigns occurring in close proximity to the social norms intervention.

Fidelity

The extent to which the intervention strategy was implemented as planned (e.g., number of planned and unplanned activities).

MEASURING OUTCOMES

Perceptions of peers' typical behaviors and attitudes

Measure whether the perceptions of the intended audience became more accurate regarding beliefs about peer substance use.

Substance use and protective behaviors and attitudes

Determine whether shifts in perception had a resulting impact on actual levels of substance use and/or engagement in protective behaviors.

Reductions in negative consequences

If collected at baseline, re-assess to determine if the intervention led to a reduction of negative consequences related to substance use.

RESOURCES

Explore these resources to learn more about taking a social norms approach in your substance use prevention communications:

- [A Guide to Marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools & Communities](#)
- [Resources for Measuring Social Norms: A Practical Guide for Program Implementers](#)
- [The Positive Community Norms Student Survey](#)
- [Promoting Positive Community Norms](#)

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