Using a Social Norms Approach to Prevent Youth Substance Use
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Youth substance use is associated with early sexual initiation, multiple sexual partners, and unprotected sex.[1,2] Both youth substance use and adolescent unplanned pregnancy have similar risk factors, which include early initiation of and having peers who engage in risky behaviors like substance use.[3] Early sexual initiation is associated with youth who use substances like alcohol, drugs (e.g., marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine), and cigarettes.[4] Adopting prevention strategies that address substance use as part of your adolescent pregnancy prevention program can also help youth abstain from or delay early sexual initiation. One such strategy is a social norms approach, an evidence-based prevention strategy known to be effective at reducing youth risk behaviors such as substance use and early sexual initiation.[5,6]

A norm is a behavior or attitude that is held by the majority of a group or community, in this case, youth.[7] The use of a social norms approach as a prevention strategy aims to correct misperceptions about healthy norms. Instead of focusing on the negative behavior (e.g., youth engaged in substance use), a social norms campaign focuses on the positive behavior. Often, youth overestimate the number of their peers who are engaging in substance use. By using a social norms approach, you can help correct this misperception through a focus on the healthy norm: that most people do *not* engage in a risky behavior. Correcting the misperception about how many peers are using illicit substances can help prevent or lessen youth substance use.[8]

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH

A social norms approach, as described here, is different from other traditional public health approaches that aim to change social norms. This tip sheet describes an approach that *corrects* misperceptions of social norms; it does not attempt to change norms because these norms are healthy behaviors or attitudes.[9] The social norms approach is based on the following assumptions:[10]

- Youth's attitudes and behaviors are highly influenced by what they believe their peers' attitudes and behaviors are.

- Perceptions can be inaccurate. For example, youth overestimate their peers' use of alcohol and underestimate their peers' positive health behaviors.[11]

- Misperceptions of peers' attitudes and behaviors can lead youth to conform to a risky behavior, such as drinking, if they believe that is the normal behavior of their peers.[12]

- Correcting this misperception allows youth to act in a way that aligns with their own beliefs, which most often involve positive behaviors.

To help put this in perspective, imagine you have a middle school student named Alex in your program. If Alex *believes* that drinking is harmful and that most other students drink alcohol, Alex is more likely to end up drinking alcohol. However, if Alex *believes* that drinking is harmful and *knows* that most other students do not drink alcohol, Alex is more likely *not* to drink alcohol as well.

Research on social norms approaches to reduce high-risk behaviors has been conducted in various settings (e.g., colleges, high schools, and middle schools), but most research has been conducted on college campuses with a focus on reducing high-risk drinking. Social norms marketing campaigns implemented among youth in high school settings have led to statistically significant declines in overall alcohol use.[13] Similar results have been seen in high schools with tobacco and alcohol use.[14] Additional evaluation data can be found at The National Social Norms Center.

BASIC STEPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SOCIAL NORMS INTERVENTION

A social norms approach is most often implemented through a marketing campaign, but can also be incorporated into small group activities, online interventions, and existing curricula. These interventions can be local—implemented in one school or after-school setting—and do not need to be costly. The basic steps in the development of a social norms intervention include the following:

1. **Develop a hypothesis**. Imagine you are focused on reducing alcohol use at the local middle or high school. Are there misperceptions among students about alcohol use? Do most students not drink alcohol, but think that their peers do?

2. **Design and administer a survey to test if the misperceptions exist**. The survey you design should collect data about students' behaviors and perceptions of their peers' behaviors. The survey can be conducted with an entire school or school district, or within an after-school program (ideally in groups of 20 or more youth). For example, if you are focused on alcohol use, a survey might include the following two questions:

   – During the past 30 days, on how many days did you have at least 1 drink of alcohol?

   – During the past 30 days, on how many days do you think a typical student at your school had at least 1 drink of alcohol?

   If you are incorporating social norms into an in-person workshop, decide when and how you are going to survey the young people (i.e., prior to or during the workshop). Keep in mind the importance of confidentiality and anonymity. Always check with your organization before administering a survey to see if it will require Institutional Review Board or Office of Management and Budget approval. If it does, consider conducting an informal poll about one or two of your survey questions to help inform your social norms campaign.

3. **Analyze your data to determine if the hypothesis is true.** Determine whether misperceptions exist with regards to the attitude or behavior that you want to change. Using the example questions above, you may find the following results:

   – The majority of students reported zero days of drinking at least 1 drink of alcohol in the past 30 days.

   – The majority of students indicated that they think their peers have had 4 days of drinking at least 1 drink of alcohol in the past 30 days.

   – These results indicate that there is a clear misperception about the norm regarding alcohol use.

If your hypothesis is false, meaning there are no misperceptions about a behavior or attitude, then a social norms approach will not work.

For an in-person workshop, consider when and how you will analyze the data. Will the data collection happen during or prior to the workshop? How much time do you need to analyze the data?

4. **Design a marketing campaign or workshop to correct the misperception**. Decide what marketing materials you want and have the resources to create (e.g., posters, a social media campaign). It may be especially helpful to engage the youth in your program to determine what kind of marketing materials they want to see and how they might look. Then, based on the misperception identified in the previous step, develop a marketing campaign focused on the positive, actual behavior (e.g., not drinking). Using the example above, the primary message of the campaign might be, "Most of us don't use alcohol."

A workshop design will depend on how and when you collect and analyze the data. One example of a workshop outline would include explaining and conducting the survey, presenting the results and true norms (i.e., healthy behavior), and discussing why misperceptions occur and implications of the activity. Additional examples can be found at A Grassroots' Guide to Fostering Healthy Norms to Reduce Violence in our Communities: Social Norms Toolkit.

5. **Use the marketing campaign to educate your target audience and community**. Before launching the campaign, educate stakeholders and youth about the misperception so that they can understand the social norms approach and reinforce the message.

Implementing a workshop that either focuses on or includes a social norms activity can be the first step in educating your audience about the approach before conducting a large-scale marketing campaign.

6. **Evaluate the impact of your campaign or workshop**. Following implementation of the marketing campaign or workshop, if resources allow, conduct an evaluation, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, to assess behavior and attitude changes.

Keep in mind that a social norms campaign does not work overnight. It requires time to both develop the campaign and see behavior/attitude changes.
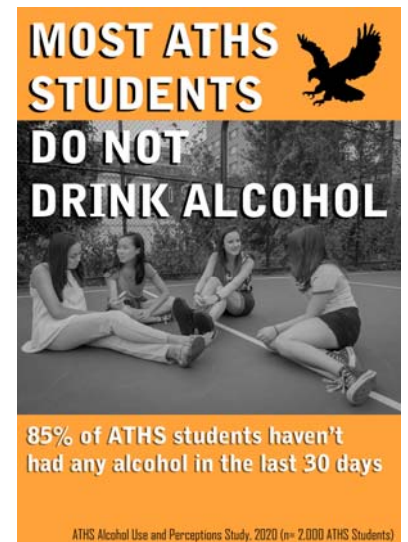

Figure 1: An example of a social norms campaign poster

TIPS FOR GETTNG STARTED

- **Conduct research and become more familiar with the social norms approach.** A social norms approach is different from traditional prevention programming and may require more outreach to garner support from local stakeholders. Try to find a social norms researcher through a local university or connect with a substance use prevention coalition to assist with the campaign. If a local expert is not available, become more informed about social norms using the resources listed in this tip sheet and connect with other communities who have implemented social norms campaigns.

- **Ask the right questions at the beginning.** What risk behaviors are you targeting? What prevention efforts have been or are being implemented to tackle that behavior? What data do you already have and what data do you need to collect? What population needs to see this messaging? These are all questions that will help you define your issue and target audience.

- **Assess for readiness.** Does your community/school/organization understand the social norms approach? Is your community/school/organization ready to address risky behaviors using this approach? Do you have

financial and other resources to support it? Additional questions to consider can be found in [The Toolbox: The 7-Step Montana Model on Social Norms Marketing.](#)

- **Ensure your data collection process is approved.** Before you create and disseminate a survey to gather information for your social norms campaign, research your organization's or school's policies on survey administration, including how to keep data anonymous. If your community is already conducting the [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) (YRBS), you may be able to add a question or two to help assess student's perceptions. Sample surveys and questions can be found in [A Guide to Marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools and Communities.](#)

- **Establish partnerships and develop a workgroup or committee to focus on social norms**. Workgroup or committee members can help plan, design, implement, and evaluate a social norms campaign. Members can also assist with increasing community support of a social norms approach and reinforce key messages from the marketing campaign. Examples of key partners include

    – schools;

    – substance use prevention coalitions or other similar groups;

    – youth advisory boards or other youth groups;

    – local government agencies focused on substance use;

    – community groups with similar foci; and

    – local businesses (both as a financial resource and outlet for marketing materials).

- **Develop your marketing plan.** Before creating messages and designing products, develop a marketing plan to determine who, what, when, where, how many, and at what cost.[15] Check current YRBS data to look for trends or see if there are state or local YRBS data available for your area. It is also important to consult with your target audience and key stakeholders to test the messages and pilot products (e.g., posters, social media campaign).[16]

RESOURCES

- [A Guide to Marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools and Communities](#): in-depth social norms approach resource covering each stage from planning to development to evaluation, including case studies, sample surveys, and sample campaign materials.

- [The Social Norms Toolbox](#): includes information on the 7-Step Montana Model of Social Norms Marketing and tips for getting started.

- [A Grassroots' Guide to Fostering Healthy Norms to Reduce Violence in our Communities: Social Norms Toolkit](#): in-depth resource using examples from the sexual violence field.

- [An Overview of the Social Norms Approach:](#) overview of the social norms approach, including background, theory, research, implementation, and challenges.

- [How to Implement a Social Marketing Poster Campaign:](#) tips on how to develop a poster campaign and conduct focus groups to receive feedback on a campaign.

- [Changing Social Norms:](#) provides key definitions, an overview of the issues, tips, and additional resources.

- [NJ Social Norms Project](#): background and materials from the New Jersey Department of Education's Social Norms Project.

- [Social Norms Health and Safety Promotion Programs for Middle Schools and High Schools](): additional resources for conducting a social norms marketing campaign in middle and high schools.

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