

Social Norms Approach: A Health Promotion Strategy to Preventing Youth Risk Behaviors

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TIPS FOR USING A SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH IN YOUR ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY PREVENTION (APP) PROGRAM

- **Become familiar with a social norms approach.** Find experts within your community (researchers, organizations, educators) or online resources that can help you understand the social norms approach.
- **Ask the right questions at the beginning.** Be clear on the risk behaviors you want to address and the population with which you want to work.
- **Assess for readiness.** Consider your organization's capacity to implement a social norms approach, given your needs, assets, and resources.
- **Ensure your data collection process is approved.** All data should be collected ethically and in alignment with your organization's policies and procedures.

Risk-taking behavior is a key feature of adolescence (Duell & Steinberg, 2021). Some risks youth engage in—such as trying new activities, meeting new people, and exploring new ideas—are critical to healthy physical, social, and emotional development. However, there are other risks (e.g., substance use, early initiation of sex, unprotected sex, violent behavior) that can place youth in harmful situations, having both short-term effects and long-term consequences lasting into adulthood.

Engaging in one risky behavior is often related to other risky behaviors. For example, youth substance use is associated with early sexual initiation, multiple sexual partners, and unprotected sex—all of which are linked to unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Ritchwood et al., 2015; Schantz, 2012; Tapert et al., 2001). Research findings demonstrate youth who perpetrate dating violence are more likely to report multiple sexual partners and inconsistent condom use and are more likely to engage in illegal activities (Fedina et al., 2016).

Adopting prevention strategies that address one or more risky behaviors as a part of your APP program can help youth abstain from or delay early sexual initiation. One such strategy is a social norms approach, an evidence-based prevention strategy

TIPS CONTINUED

- **Establish partnerships and develop a workgroup or committee to focus on social norms.** Think of partners who have expertise and knowledge on the behavior of interest and your intended audience.
- **Develop your marketing plan.** Remember to ask the 4 Ws (who, what, when, where), how many, and at what cost.

[Click here for more detailed planning tips for incorporating a social norms approach into your adolescent prevention programming.](#)

known to be effective at reducing youth risk behaviors, such as substance use and early sexual initiation (Berkowitz, 2005; Berkowitz, 2013; Messer et al., 2011).

A norm is a behavior or attitude that is held by the majority of a group or community—in this case, youth (Berkowitz, 2013). 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 or early initiation of sex), a social norms campaign focuses on the positive behavior.

Often, youth overestimate the number of their peers who are having sex or engaging in substance use or other risky behaviors (Lewis et al., 2014). 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 engaging in risky behaviors can help promote healthier behaviors, such as not using substances, delaying sex, or having protected sex (Berkowitz, 2005; Dillon & Lochman).

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. In these cases, the social norms are actually healthy behaviors or attitudes (Berkowitz, 2005). A social norms approach is based on the following assumptions:

- Youth attitudes and behaviors are highly influenced by what they believe their peers' attitudes and behaviors are (Wambeam et al., 2014).
- Perceptions can be inaccurate. For example, youth overestimate their peers' use of alcohol and underestimate their peers' positive health behaviors (Haines et al., 2005; Lewis et al., 2014).
- Misperceptions of peers' attitudes and behaviors can lead youth to conform to a risky behavior, such as drinking or engaging in violent behaviors, if they believe that is the normal behavior of their peers (D'Amico & McCarthy, 2006).
- A misperception has to exist for a social norms approach to work. If most young people are actually engaging in a risky behavior, then another intervention focusing on behavior change would be most appropriate (Berkowitz, 2013).
- Correcting this misperception allows youth to act in a way that aligns with their own beliefs, which most often involve positive behaviors (Berkowitz, 2013).

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 but also believes 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.

Research has been conducted on social norms approaches to reducing high risk behaviors in various settings (e.g., colleges, high schools, 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 middle and high school settings have led to statistically significant declines in overall tobacco use (Schmidt et al., 2009), alcohol use, and sexual risk-taking (Haines et al., 2005; Messer et al., 2011). Additional evaluation data can be found at [The National Social Norms Center](#). Ultimately, the goal of using a social norms approach is to prevent risk-taking behavior by focusing on healthy behaviors and attitudes. Promoting the narrative that most youth are not engaging in a risky behavior encourages young people to maintain the healthy behavior.

BASIC STEPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SOCIAL NORMS CAMPAIGN

A social norms approach is most often implemented through a marketing campaign, but it can also be incorporated into small group activities, workshops, online interventions, and existing curricula within your current APP programming. These campaigns can be local—implemented in one school or afterschool setting—and do not need to be costly. Using sexual behavior as an example, here are the basic steps to develop a social norms campaign:

- 1. Introduce a social norms approach as a health promotion strategy.** Before launching the campaign, it is important that stakeholders and youth understand the approach, its assumptions, and how it is used to promote healthy behaviors. You can explain the approach within the context of the misperception you want to address so the purpose of the social norms campaign is clear.
- 2. Develop a hypothesis.** Imagine you are focused on improving sexual health outcomes at the local high school. Are there misperceptions among students about how many teens are having sex? Are most students not having sex, but think that their peers are?
- 3. Design and administer a survey to test whether 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 afterschool program (ideally in groups of 20 or more youth). For example, if you are focused on sexual behavior, a survey might include the following questions:
 - During the past 3 months, with how many people did you have sexual intercourse?
 - During the past 3 months, with how many people do you think a typical student at your school had sexual intercourse?



If you are incorporating social norms into an in-person workshop, decide when and how you are going to survey youth participants (i.e., prior to or during the workshop). Keep in mind the importance of confidentiality and anonymity. There are several online poll platforms like [Kahoot!](#), [Quizizz](#), or [Poll Everywhere](#) that can be used to collect data in person or virtually. Consider conducting an informal poll about one or two of your survey questions to help inform your social norms campaign. In this case, you would not collect any personal identifying information like age, race, or grade, nor ask about individual behaviors. Always check with your organization before administering a survey to see if it will require Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval.

There are also larger datasets, like [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#) (YRBSS), [Adolescent Behavior and Experiences Survey](#) (ABES), and [Monitoring the Future](#) that collect data on youth behaviors across the country. You may find data specific to your district or county that can be used to capture behaviors related to substance use, sexual activity, and violence. [Checking Our Reality](#), which provides an engaging lesson designed to supplement a school's or organization's youth programming, is another useful resource. The module, which uses YRBSS data, helps youth learn the difference between peer influence and peer pressure, tests their knowledge about peer norms and misperceptions, and allows them to apply their knowledge by designing a social norms campaign or workshop.

- 4. Analyze your data to determine if the hypothesis is true.** Keep in mind when and how you will analyze the data. How much time do you need to analyze? Once these decisions have been made, determine whether misperceptions exist with regards to the attitude or behavior you want to change. Using the example questions above, you may find the following results:

Finding 1: Most students reported not having had sex in the past 3 months.

Finding 2: Most students indicated that they think their peers have had sex with two or more partners in the past 3 months.

These results indicate a clear misperception about the norm regarding sexual behavior. If your hypothesis is false (i.e., there are no misperceptions about a behavior or attitude), a social norms approach will not work. In this case, you will need to select an evidence-based program focused on changing norms and behaviors.



5. Design and implement a campaign or workshop to correct the misperception among your intended audience. Decide what materials you want and have the resources to create (e.g., posters, public service announcements [PSAs], social media campaign). It may be especially helpful to engage the youth in your program to determine what kind of materials they want to see and solicit their help in creating them (e.g., social media posts, videos, scripts). Then, based on the misperception identified in the previous step, develop a campaign focused on the positive, actual behavior (e.g., abstaining from sex). Be sure to have a clear, simple and appealing message. The primary message of a campaign for the example above might be “Most of us are not having sex.”

The design for a workshop that uses a social norms approach 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 as well as implications of the activity. You could also make the workshop more interactive by allowing youth to summarize and interpret the data independently in groups.

The green box to the right includes examples of social norms marketing campaigns that have been used to address different behaviors. Additionally, [A Grassroots' Guide to Fostering Healthy Norms to Reduce Violence in our Communities: Social Norms Toolkit](#) is a great resource to use in developing your marketing plan.



EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL NORMS MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

[Be Your Best U.](#): Poster and video campaigns focused on substance use and bullying among youth in Colorado

[Youth Health & Safety Project](#): Poster campaigns related to substance use, bullying, and weight management

[It's Who We Are](#): Focused on underage drinking in Washakie, Wyoming

- 6. Evaluate the outcome 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. This can be done by administering surveys at different time points: baseline, then 1, 3, or 6 months post-implementation. The initial survey will serve as your baseline and the comparison point to determine change in behaviors or attitudes. You want to capture data from young people who actually engaged with the campaign or attended the workshop. These data will help you draw the correct conclusions on the impact of the campaign. Remember: a social norms campaign does not work overnight. It requires time to both develop the campaign and see behavior and attitude changes.

PLANNING TIPS FOR INCORPORATING A SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH INTO YOUR ADOLESCENT PREVENTION PROGRAMMING

- **Become 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. For accessibility purposes, try to find a social norms researcher through a local university or connect with a local expert (educator, organization, coalition) who is familiar with your community 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 that 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 questions will help you define your issue and intended 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 Montana Model of 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, you may be able to add a question or two to assess student perceptions on various risky behaviors. 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 help increase community support of a social norms approach and reinforce key messages from the marketing campaign. Examples of key partners include schools, coalitions or other similar groups, youth advisory boards or other youth groups, local government agencies focused on youth outcomes, community groups with similar foci, and local businesses (both as a financial resource and outlet for marketing materials). Be sure to include youth from your intended audience because they will know what resonates best with their peers.
- **Develop your marketing plan.** Before creating messages and designing products, develop a marketing plan that can answer all the key questions: "who, what, when, where, how many, and at what cost" (Haines et al., 2005). It is also important to consult with your intended audience and key stakeholders to test the messages and pilot products (e.g., posters, videos, social media campaign). Ensure the messages are appealing and appropriate for the intended audience.



RESOURCES

1. [A Guide to Marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools and Communities](#): In depth resource covering each stage of the social norms approach from planning to development to evaluation, including case studies, sample surveys, and sample campaign materials
2. [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
3. [An Overview of the Social Norms Approach](#): Overview of the social norms approach, including background, theory, research, implementation, and challenges
4. [Montana Model of Social Norms Marketing](#): Provides a toolbox with seven steps to develop a social norms marketing campaign
5. [Center for Health and Safety Culture](#): Known for the Montana Model of Social Norms Marketing, the Center has revamped to promote social norms projects that address a wide variety of health and social issues based on its new Positive Community Norms Framework
6. [Friday Night Live](#): Toolkit for implementing a social norm marketing campaign
7. [Youth Positive Social Norms Campaign Packet](#): Steps to conducting a social norms campaign, specific to alcohol prevention
8. [Natural High](#): Six-part video series on social norms, understanding adolescent behaviors, and ways to communicate about substance use
9. [National Social Norms Center](#): Provides an overview of the social norms approach, evidence for best practices, and a guide on creating messaging for social norms campaigns
10. [The Norm Project](#): A poster campaign toolkit
11. [NJ Social Norms Project](#): Background and materials from the New Jersey Department of Education's Social Norms Project
12. [Social Norms Health and Safety Promotion Programs for Middle Schools and High Schools](#): Resources for conducting a social norms marketing campaign in middle and high schools

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